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The Eclipse and I

JANUARY 75c • UK 30p.

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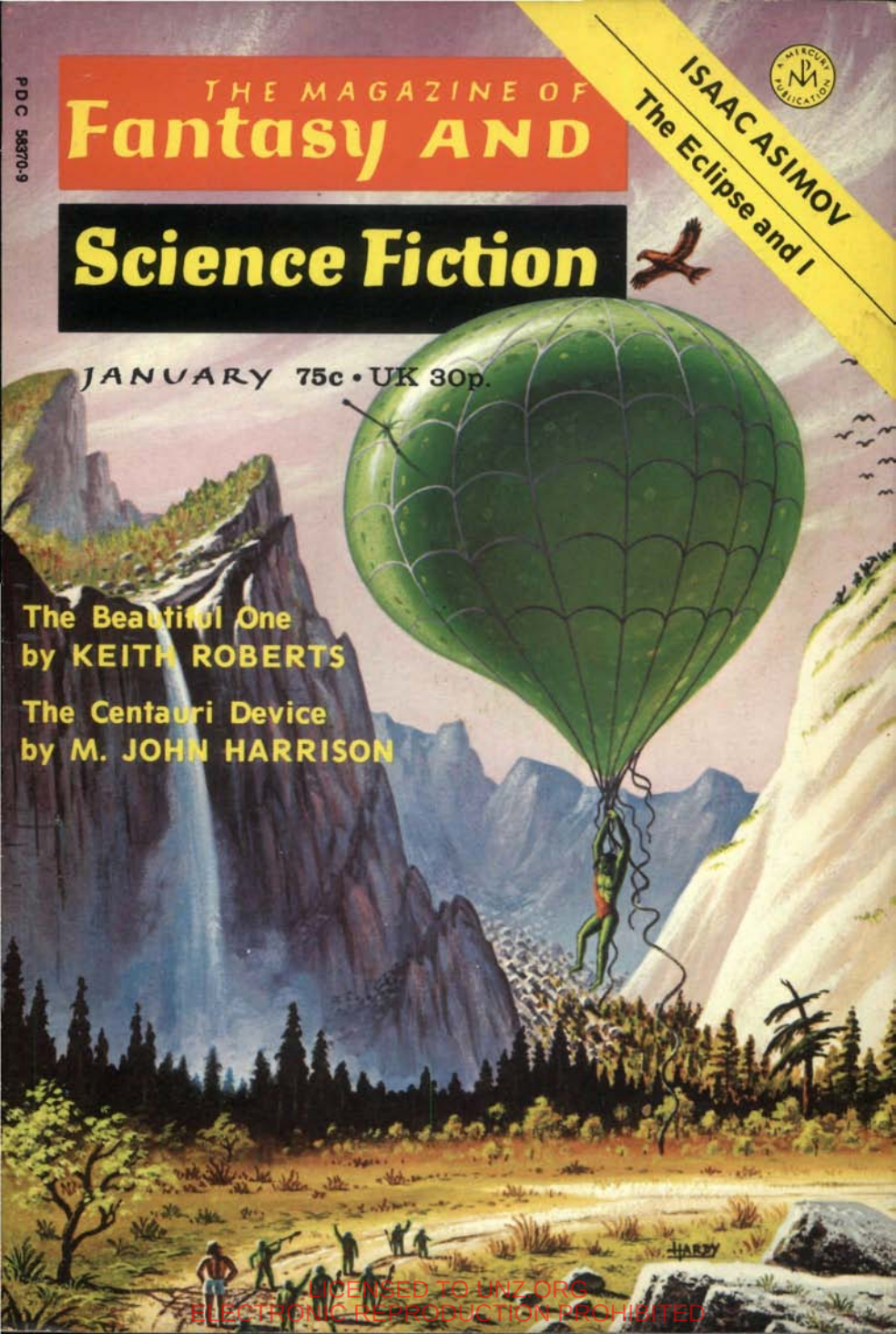
by KEITH ROBERTS

The Centauri Device
by M. JOHN HARRISON



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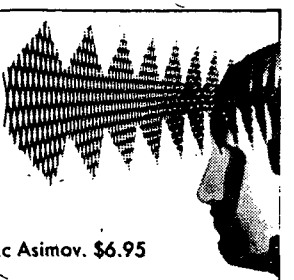

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NOVELETS

The Witch and the Well	PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN	5
The Centauri Device	M. JOHN HARRISON	56
The Beautiful One	KEITH ROBERTS	95

SHORT STORIES

The Sled	PAUL DARCY BOLES	42
A Board In the Other Direction	RUTH BERMAN	86
The Tigers of Hysteria	MICHAEL BISHOP	118
The Initiation of Akasa	MICHAEL G. CONEY	145

FEATURES

Books	HARLAN ELLISON	34
Cartoon	GAHAN WILSON	55
Films	BAIRD SEARLES	83
Science: The Eclipse and I	ISAAC ASIMOV	134

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Phyllis Eisenstein established herself as a superior storyteller with two earlier stories, "Born to Exile," August 1971 and "Inn of the Black Swan," November 1972. Below is the third in this very well received series about Alaric, a young minstrel with a talent for teleportation.

The Witch and the Well

by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

Moonlight, Alaric thought, stripped ten years from Mizella's life; it blurred the crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes and softened the rough, red skin of her hands as well as any lotion. By moonlight she stirred a pot of stew and added twigs to the fire beneath it, humming tunelessly all the while.

Alaric plucked at his lute with unconscious skill, drawing from it an aimless, melancholy air to fit his melancholy thoughts. Just before sunset he had climbed a thick-boled oak and, hanging high in the air amid the waxy, dark-green leaves of summer, he scanned the horizon and finally sighted a village of some hundred houses among the low hills to the north. It was the very first sign of human life — barring a weather-beaten farmhouse that sheltered only a family of foxes — that they had encountered since leaving the perpetual twilight of the great forest. A village meant copper and silver, fresh-baked bread, a mattress of straw instead of twigs, and a roof to ward off the elements and the morning dew; yet the young minstrel felt no elation in himself, no pleasure at the prospect of meeting other human beings. That one other human being for whom he cared would not be there — he had only the memory of her, and a favor of black silk fancifully embroidered, that could not fill the emptiness of his heart.

He glanced up at Mizella, who was warm and willing flesh and blood. She was crushing fragrant herbs between the thumb and

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forefinger of her right hand, strewing the powder over their bubbling dinner.

"We'll have no trouble reaching the village tomorrow," he said.

She smiled. "You must be tired of such a small audience as I."

"Not so tired, but at least I won't have to procure our meals from old Trif any more."

"The misbegotten scum," she muttered, her mood shifting abruptly. "You and I worked long enough for those few provisions; he owes us more than a pair of chickens and a slab of mutton."

"I won't argue with that, but I'll be pleased to avoid such danger in the future and earn our fare in a less exciting manner."

"There is no danger for you," she said firmly.

His fingers struck a discord. "You are far more certain of that than I."

"What has a witch to fear?"

"A real witch, who could summon a spirit to his aid or form an invisible barrier about his body with the wave of a hand, would have nothing at all to fear. But real witches do not exist, else they'd rule the world and folk would not merely *believe* in them but would *know,* without doubt. I am not a real witch, no matter what you say, Mizella, and I can die as easily as any man. I dodge a bit faster, nothing else."

Mizella lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "Trif knows you can't be killed."

"I've been lucky. But I have only one pair of eyes. If Trif and the others weren't cowards who dare slay only sleeping men, they would post a guard in the kitchen. I fear that, Mizella. If I keep returning to the inn, they will either desert the place from fear or gather up the courage to wait for me with naked swords. One or the other. They won't be able to bear my visits much longer. I've had enough of them; I won't go back again."

"Not even for Trif's gold?"

"No. Least of all for that, for he keeps it in his bedchamber. I'm not greedy enough to take that chance."

"I wish I could have seen his face the moment after we vanished into thin air," said Mizella. She stirred the stew so vigorously that it slopped over, making the fire hiss and crackle. "I wonder if he fell on his knees and cried out to the Holy Ones, begging forgiveness for his evil deeds. Perhaps even now he lives in terror of your return, not to steal a bit of meat from the kitchen but to steal the heart and liver from his body." She turned angry eyes to her companion. "I wish you would kill him!"

Alaric grimaced and glanced away. He didn't like to see Mizella this way, commanding him to be an

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avenging demon. Trif and his henchmen were murderers, but Alaric had no desire to be the hand of justice. Mizella bore on her back the mark of Trif's whip, and Alaric himself could not forget the clash of steel on sharp-honed steel and the red glare of death in Trif's eyes. But he was glad to be gone and free and alive, and if his hunting skills had been as polished as his musical ones, he would never have gone back to the Inn of the Black Swan beyond reclaiming his horse and his lute deep in the night.

"Mizella, you hate too hard," he said.

"And you don't hate hard enough. If I had your power...if *I* had your power, what vengeance I would wreak on some who deserve all I could give and more! If only you could teach me...?"

"No. There is nothing to be taught." He turned his back on her, to cut off the oft-repeated question and to gather a few more parched sticks for the fire. He had known hate a time or two — the stepfather whose resentment drew an echo from a small boy's soul; the unknown, unseen bandits who had cut short a beloved life; the King whose word had banished him from the sight of the face that haunted his dreams. Yes, he had known hate and, worse, self-hate: for loving the unattainable and nearly destroying it, for running craven when a better man would have stood and faced his fate. But hate was an emotion too violent for a young minstrel's heart to nourish forever; it had faded in weeks or months or years. He hoped that it would do the same for her.

"Mizella, I have been thinking," he said. "You've lived in the land of Durman, have you not?"

"Yes, some years, mostly in the city of Majinak."

"Are your children there?"

"My children...?" She glanced up sharply. "Why do you ask?"

He thrust a twig into the fire. "I thought, if you wanted to find them —"

"No!" Her fingers tightened on the stirring spoon. "No," she said, her voice more controlled. "I'm sure they are happier where they are, wherever they are. They wouldn't want a whore for a mother, not a whore who abandoned them because they threatened her livelihood. Would you want to meet such a mother?"

"Well...yes. I would like to meet my mother. I would like to know the color of her hair, her eyes, and whether she is rich or poor. I have often wondered about her and wondered why she left me to die. Perhaps her reasons were the same as yours. Perhaps I am a whore's bastard. But I would like to know."

"She's glad you can't find her to ask."

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"*You* are glad, on *your* children's account."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

She sighed, and her voice fell soft and hesitant. "I see them in my dreams sometimes: the girl is dark and small, like me, and her face is my face when I was young; the boy is a blurred stranger — I think I would know him if only I could see his features clearly. Let's speak of something else."

"Let's speak of dinner."

"It's ready." She ladled the steaming stew onto their tin plates, and they ate in silence. Later, he sang a little, and she listened.

The village was the hub of a system of fields that sprawled in irregular quadrilaterals over the hilly countryside. Shortly past dawn, whole families were working these tracts — bent-backed old-sters, young women in dun-colored dresses, and scrambling, half-clad children weeded and hoed among the barley and beans. A herd of black cattle, kept from the grain by whistling, shouting, barelegged youths and yelping dogs, cropped the grass that grew knee-high in fallow patches. The dogs were first to take note of Alaric and Mizella, and they approached with caution.

"Hullo!" Alaric shouted to no one in particular and to anyone within earshot. He waved toward the nearest cluster of toilers.

Heads came up and eyes squinted at the two strangers who rode a single gray horse. Pitchforks and scythes appeared, previously hidden by the tall grass and the taller grain. A woman, heavy in the last weeks of pregnancy, backed away; three men moved to shield her as they advanced.

These folk have seen bandits lately, Alaric thought, and he smiled till his cheeks ached.

"Who would you be?" asked the nearest man. He brandished a pitchfork. Sweat gleamed on his bare shoulders and dampened his sun-bleached hair, though the day was not yet hot.

Alaric dismounted, leaving Mizella in the saddle. He was virtually unarmed, the sword he scarcely knew how to use well-wrapped in his bedroll, the dagger sheathed at his waist. "I am Alaric the minstrel, and this is the lady Mizella. Weary of travel, we seek shelter and offer song in return."

"You come from the south."

"No," said Alaric, guessing from the sharp tone of voice that marauders had swooped down upon the village from that direction. "From the east, good sir. We turned north only after spying your homes from afar and yearning for the comforts they represented."

Mizella strummed the lute, which she had carried under one arm since they left their campsite.

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The farmers had banded together now, a phalanx bristling with steel points. They were unwashed, sweaty men, muscular, most naked to the waist. Behind them, the young cowherds clutched stout staves, and the smallest children hid among the peacefully grazing cattle. The women were already halfway to the village, walking backwards to keep watch on the confrontation.

With a broad gesture, Alaric reached for the lute, drew it from Mizella's hands, and plucked the lowest string. He sang of the beautiful witch whose garden grew nothing but weeds because a flock of birds ate all the herb and flower seeds; robins, thrushes, and jays — all were suitors who had wished to end her solitary days, enchanted by her own hand and meting out the only retribution within their power. At last, she lifted the enchantments, and marjoram, basil, and thyme, purple larkspur and pink cowslips flourished once more about her cottage, and the young men — wiser and warier — found themselves plain, unmagical brides. But the son had a sad ending: many years later, when the witch began to feel lonely, no one asked for her hand; all were fearful of enchantment, for the tale had spread far and wide. And so she died alone, and the melody ceased with a mournful wail.

The farmers whispered among themselves, and at last their spokesman said, "We see you are indeed a minstrel, but as to whether you may stay in our village, that is a matter for Harbet to decide."

"I will sing for Lord Harbet, then."

"He is no lord, merely a peasant like the rest of us, but he is wise in the ways of the land and of men. Follow me."

Alaric remounted behind Mizella and followed. Most of the other farmers fell in at his left and right, their heads and pitchforks cocked in his direction.

"I don't like this," said Mizella. "Why don't we just pass this village by?"

Alaric shrugged. "I've seen this kind of treatment before, where the arm of the King or the Count or the Duke is weak and the people have to guard themselves. These suspicions pass after a few songs."

"Oh, innocent minstrel! Have you forgotten the Inn of the Black Swan so soon?"

"A whole village? Well, we will keep our eyes open, but I think they fear we are bandits, rather than being such themselves." He stroked her arm reassuringly.

The narrow, crooked pathway that entered the town was rutted from the wheels of many carts and littered with the dung of many cows; it steamed in the early

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morning sun. Houses, painted red and black and white with symbols intended to ward off evil, huddled together within the village walls, each separated from its neighbor by a space only wide enough for a tiny garden of squash or carrots or berries. In the center of the settlement, facing a sizable open space containing a well, was the home of the headman; larger than all the rest, it boasted two windows, one on either side of the extra-broad doorway. Both sets of shutters were partly open to the mild summer air, and red, homespun curtains rippled within.

The leader of the farmers leaned in one of the windows and shouted, "Harbet!"

Harbet opened the door. He was a huge man, his shoulders wide and muscular, his beard black as pitch, his skin deeply bronzed. He bore a cudgel in one fist and a huge hammer in the other. "Who calls Harbet?" he roared, his voice a bass drum roll.

The reply was so low-pitched that Alaric could not hear it above the wind and the buzzing conversation of the other villagers around him. He smiled again to all of them, and he dismounted to doff his cap and bow to the man in authority.

"Minstrel, minstrel," said Harbet at last. "Well, I suppose I must let you lie in my house this night, but I'll not stand a second! Someone else must take you if you stay beyond tomorrow."

Alaric shrugged. "We stay as long as a song is welcome."

The man who had called at the window raised his arm. "My house has room enough."

"So be it," Harbet replied.

Alaric reached up to help Mizella slide from the saddle. "We thank you, gentles," he said. "And now, if someone will see to my horse, and if someone else will bring a pair of stools, we will sit here in the square where any may listen."

"Not in the square!" said Harbet, and a sudden murmur from the crowd underlined his words. He cleared his throat. "We are hard-working folk; we have no time to sit in the sun and listen to a minstrel pass the hours. Our fields require attention, our herds require attention. Later, when the candles must be lit and each man may relax after his dinner — *then* we may listen. And until then, minstrel, I suggest that you come inside, drink a cup of wine, and watch my wife spin."

Alaric glanced about, saw the villagers nodding agreement; several turned immediately and hurried up the street.

"Come in," said Harbet. "There's carrot bread as well as wine, and my wife won't mind a song to speed the thread."

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The interior of the house — one great room — was colorful and cluttered. The double bed in the far corner, the smaller bed nearby, the table and six stools — all were painted with magical devices; elaborate characters were even incised into the hard wood of the tabletop, where scraps of food and fragments of wool had stuck in the grooves. Charms hung on the walls, and onions at the windows, and the woman who spun gray wool by the fire wore a sprig of willow in her hair, proof against the evil eye. Alaric had never before seen so much evidence of superstition in one place.

Their host measured the wine carefully and the bread less so. After serving his guests and taking a generous portion for himself, he introduced his wife, Zinovev.

"I know a song about her — the original Zinovev," Alaric said. "Legend says she was a lovely lady, even as you are, my lady."

She blushed and smiled with downcast eyes and pumped the treadle of the spinning wheel a littler harder. The compliment was fantasy, for she was plain and freckled and thin to emaciation, and there were dark circles under her eyes from too much late work. But she dressed neatly, though in plain homespun, and her hair was combed and fastened with a fillet — she cared about her appearance, as a headman's wife should, and in this she was far lovelier than many a pretty slattern Alaric had met in his wanderings.

"Zinovev," he said, "was mistress to a great lord who ruled near the Eastern Sea. He gave her a palace, jewels, furs, everything a woman could desire, and when he fell on low times, she was his strong right arm." He sang of her childhood as the youngest daughter of an impoverished house, of her early marriage to an old man, of his death and her subsequent pilgrimage to the Holy Well at Canby, of her meeting with the great lord, who was disguised and must remain nameless for the sake of the singer's life. He sang of her palace, set on an island offshore and, by chance rather than intention, an impregnable fortification; there, when he was defeated a dozen times over in battle, came her lord, desiring only to bid her a last farewell and throw himself from the highest parapet of a tower that overhung the sea. But Zinovev persuaded him to raise a fresh army and try once more to recapture his lost lands; together they planned his campaigns, directing them from horseback or from tents on the windswept northern plains or from shipboard near the coast, and at last they regained his power, and peace settled on his domain. He offered Zinovev anything, every-

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thing, but she wanted only his happiness and was content with her island palace and his love. "Which, of course," said Alaric, when the song was done, "meant that she did indeed have everything, for what man can deny the woman who holds his heart?"

"How beautiful," murmured Harbet's wife. "I did not know there was such a famous Zinovev. My mother heard the name once and loved it." She glanced at her husband. "What a fine voice the young man has."

Harbet shrugged. "I have work to finish." He walked out and closed the door hard behind him.

Zinovev rose from her spinning. "Please forgive my husband for his rudeness; as headman, he must host every traveler who passes this way. And not many months ago, we were attacked by bandits — they looted and burned three houses at the south edge of the village before we were able to drive them off, and the homeless families had to stay with us, of course, until their new houses were built. The crowding, the eating of a good deal of our substance made his temper short. Please, have some more wine; we have plenty."

Alaric accepted a second cup. "Forgive me for saying this, but if he doesn't like being headman..."

"His grandfather's grandfather founded this village," she replied, "and the headmanship stayed in the family; our fellow villagers would have it no other way. My eldest son will take it next." She pulled the full spindle from the spinning wheel, dropped it into a large black kettle on the floor. "He likes it, but he would never tell anyone that. It's just his way."

"I see."

"I for one am glad to be a headman's wife, for we are first host to travelers who bring news of the world. Have you come from Eliath, perhaps, or Berentil?"

Alaric shook his head. "From the east, from Castle Royale and farther. We wander forever and have no home. Would you care for news of the east?"

She sat at the table and ate a few crumbs of carrot bread. "The east? There is nothing in the east but the forest which stretches to the end of the world."

"And the folk in the east think there is nothing in the west but the forest which stretches to the end of the world. Well, some few of them know of Durman. Is this village part of Durman?"

"Yes, though the very edge."

At that moment, the door burst open, slamming back against the wall, and four dirty youngsters filled the room, laughing and chattering, screaming and crying and clattering.

"What's this, what's this?" said

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Zinovev as the smallest flung himself into her arms, wailing.

"He hit me, he hit me!" he sobbed, pointing vaguely toward the others.

Zinovev stroked his head, holding him close. She looked up at the others and pointed imperiously to the floor in front of her feet. They lined up like soldiers at inspection and were immediately silent.

"What happened?"

The tallest boy replied, "Papa said come in for lunch and Pegwy didn't want to, so I hit him."

"Pegwy," she said, holding the sobbing boy at arm's length, "is that true?"

"I was blowing on the fire, Mama. I would have been done soon." He was a tiny fellow, no more than six years old, and his pale hair was streaked with soot.

"It was not necessary to hit him, Garet. Next time, let him finish what he is doing. Understand?"

Garet frowned. "Sometimes he never finishes."

"Then tell me and I will call him. I don't want the headman's children fighting in front of the whole village."

"We were in the smithy."

"And I don't want you hitting your little brother. Not until he's big enough to fight back properly. Now, go get some water and clean yourselves; we have guests."

The children looked around, noticing Alaric and Mizella for the first time. They smiled with sudden shyness, and then they ran out, four barefoot, towheaded boys. Alaric watched them through the window as they crossed the square — two had picked up buckets outside the door, but instead of going to the well, they gave it a wide berth and disappeared among the houses on the far side.

"Handsome children," he said truthfully.

"Dirty children," said Zinovev, "but you shall see them in better condition shortly.

"They're going to wash?"

"They passed the well."

"The well is dry. They'll go to the spring on the other side of the hill."

He squinted at the well — the neatly mortared stones had been daubed with the same magical patterns as every house in the village. The colors were bright, unweathered, recent. He wondered if they thought evil spirits had driven off the water.

While the children ate and prattled, Alaric sat in the corner with Mizella, tuning the lute. "Is all Durman so full of superstition?" he whispered.

"Charms, amulets, talismans, I have seen, but *this*...this is beyond the ordinary. Unless...unless they have had some experience of

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witchcraft. And recently, for the paint is no more than a year old."

"They might paint over the same patterns every year."

"You think this village is rich enough to purchase paint every year?"

"I suppose not. The bandits may have something to do with it. Might they think the bandits were brought by witchcraft?"

"I've never heard of that. Bandits come with no aid from the Dark One, save moral support. But the well is dry."

"Yes, the well is dry. But wells dry up by themselves."

"Perhaps...but perhaps," she murmured in the lowest possible voice, "you have a brother witch in this village."

Alaric frowned. "I can't make a well go dry."

"Another kind of witch, then?"

"There is no other kind of witch."

Mizella pursed her lips. "Many people would disagree with you. I remember a witch who was drowned in Majinak; she caused the lord's horse to throw him — broke his neck."

"Coincidence."

"The lord's son thought not."

"He was wrong. In Castle Royale, where I once lived for a time, they burned supposed witches — old women whose only crime was ugliness. It would seem that people always wish to blame their misfortune on *someone* rather than on chance or perhaps their own stupidity."

"Yet you sing of witches."

"My songs are pure invention. Anything can happen in a song."

Mizella sighed. "Ah, minstrel, you are young to be so certain."

"Very young," he said, nodding, "but my master was also certain, and I have seen no evidence to shake that certainty. Come, let's join our hostess and her family."

The children were finishing the last crumbs of their carrot bread, the last drops of their milk. They turned clean faces to the minstrel and smiled.

"My sweet ones," said Zinovev, "your father is surely ready for your return."

They stretched and yawned in chorus and giggled at each other before pushing back their stools and rushing out as they had first rushed in. The youngest, little Pegwy, was last; his tears were gone now. He glanced back as he crossed the threshold, and he waved to Alaric.

"He loves a new face," said his mother. "He'll be on your lap if you don't take care."

Alaric watched them cross in front of the window, and the well beyond them caught his gaze and held it long after the children were gone. He noticed now that it was

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sealed with a carefully made round lid of planks.

"They all work in the smithy with their father — dirty work, but honest," Zinovev said. She cleared the crumbs from the table with a flick of her hand. "The eldest has already made a dozen tools, and the next is not far behind. Others in the village have asked Harbet to apprentice their younger sons, but he felt that his own should come first. Minstrel?"

"Yes?"

"Minstrel, you must not stare at the well like that."

"If you wish me not to stare, good lady, I will not stare. But I was noticing the intricacy of design, the delicate execution of the strokes —"

"It is an unlucky well, minstrel." Her hands fluttered about the mantel for a moment, and then she found a fresh spindle and resumed her place at the wheel. "This has been an unlucky year for us — the bandits, the dry well, the poor weather, a low yield of crops, and other things...We are hoping for the best, we are fighting evil as well as we can — you can understand our desire to think only of the good, can't you?"

"Of course, my lady."

"The well...we don't look at it, we don't speak of it, we stay away from it. Some evil spirit has been in our village, and we are battling the Dark One with everything we have." She glanced up at the nearest charm, she touched the willow twig in her hair. "We pray that next year will be a better one."

"I fervently hope it will be, my lady, and I beg forgiveness for causing you any discomfort."

"No, no, it's all right. It's my husband that is most distressed. I warn you in advance."

"And I thank you for the warning."

"You are most welcome, minstrel." She looked up, met his eyes with her own, and smiled slowly. "Most welcome."

"Alaric," said Mizella, laying her hand on his arm, "will you sing another song?"

He obliged but hardly knew what he sang — something about a butterfly. He read with ease the emotions that flickered across Mizella's face. Envy: their hostess was no more than a year or two older, and she appeared to be exactly the sort of person Mizella wished to be — wife to an important man, mother of fine children, comfortable and respected. Jealousy: this fine, clean woman, who surely had no crimes on her conscience, had cast her eyes on Alaric, and Alaric had read the message in those eyes often enough before to recognize it. He was young and slim and straight, he was a wanderer from far away and a

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minstrel; Dall had often told him that there was something about minstrels that women invariably loved, and Alaric had learned the truth of that in recent years. He had read the message aright, but he had not and would not acknowledge it — not the headman's wife. He was young, but he was not stupid.

Mizella borrowed a needle and thread and repaired a rip in her gown. Alaric carved a new lute peg to replace one which was cracked. Zinovev spun and spun. The afternoon passed, and evening came on. At sunset, Harbet and the children closed the smithy and came in for a brief supper of cold smoked meat and boiled squash. Zinovev had hardly cleared the table when the villagers started to arrive.

One after another, they crowded in the door, filling the house, pushing aside the table, sitting on the stools and the bed and the floor, craning over each other's shoulders for a good view of the minstrel. Women came, dressed in their best dark floor-sweeping gowns and dark shawls, their hair wound in braids above their heads and decorated with willow leaves. Men came, wearing embroidered vests of red and green and yellow, carrying lavishly carved hardwood walking sticks. Children entered, clinging to their mothers' hands or walking boldly behind their fathers — children in ribbons and laces, with shiny metal buckles on their shoes. They came and filled the house to bursting, and fathers raised their small sons on their shoulders, so high that wet, well-combed heads brushed the low ceiling.

Alaric backed into the corner by the spinning wheel. "I've rarely attracted so eager an audience," he told his host.

"Mind you, don't stand on the bed!" Harbet shouted. "That bed was never meant for the weight of so many!" He swore under his breath.

"Surely we would be more comfortable outside," said Alaric. "Even with the windows and the door open, this room will soon be overwarm from many bodies."

Harbet glared at the minstrel. "Not outside," he said.

"I'm not accustomed to singing in such close quarters."

"No? Then some must go home. And scarcely a third of the village is here tonight." He turned to make the announcement.

Alaric touched his arm. "Let it be. I would not turn away such eager music lovers." He grinned. "But I will stand by the window, for I would not be the first to swoon." With the aid of his host, he elbowed his way through the crowd and settled himself on a stool in the path of the cool night breeze.

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Already, several in the audience were sweating.

"What sort of song shall it be, good sir?" he said to Harbet. "A tale of woe or a rhyme to laugh at? Dragons and gnomes and high sorcery, or sword-swinging knight and fair princess?"

"I don't care," said Harbet.

"The knight!" cried the headman's youngest boy.

"The knight it shall be." And he obliged with an epic well-known in his previous haunts but which he hoped would prove a novelty to the folk of Durman: the song of Kilaran, who yearned to be the best knight in the world and spent his life meeting every test that men and demons could devise. Wounded, he fought the seven-handed monster of Slathrum and left it bloody and dying in the forest; armed only with a sword for each hand, he vanquished the bandits of Tularab; with a song, he won the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife. "And let that demonstrate the power of music," Alaric said, ending the story with an extended chord.

"I would liefer believe in the power of music if he had beaten the bandits and the monster with its aid," said Harbet.

"I have one of those, too," said Alaric, and he launched into the tale of the man who knew the secret magical songs that brought him everything his heart desired, until he grew bored with that life and cut out his tongue to rid himself of magic forever.

Toward the end of his song, Alaric heard a noise like a dog howling, far off, indistinct, but plaintive. He fancied he could almost hear words in the howl, though he could make out no meaning, and he felt pity for the poor creature. He wondered if its masters were all at his performance and had left it tied up alone in the dark outside their house. A few people in the audience seemed to notice the sound, glancing toward the windows and the door and each other, but no one made any move to alleviate the creature's suffering.

When he finished his tragic story, the minstrel said, "Is that a dog?"

There were a few murmurs from his listeners, but no clear answer.

"The wind," said Harbet.

Alaric listened carefully for a moment. "It doesn't sound like the wind to me. Perhaps something is wrong..."

"It's nothing," said Harbet. "Sing again."

Alaric glanced around, sensing an uneasiness in the audience. Women were shifting in their seats, gathering their children a trifle closer; men slipped their arms about their wives' shoulders. Many — the majority of the adults —

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looked to Harbet anxiously, but he gave no special sign. He gazed sidewise toward Zinovev, who had drawn her two younger sons tight to her bosom.

"Sing again," Harbet commanded. "We give you hospitality in return for songs!"

Alaric strummed a chord and tried a happy tune, a tale of gossiping women who turned a whole town upside down with unfounded rumors of the King's visit. Each stanza portrayed some townsman in an amusing situation as a result of his haste to prepare for the royal visit; Alaric had often known listeners to laugh at this song till their faces went crimson, but tonight there were only a few giggles from the youngsters in the crowd and a nervous smile or two from their elders, nothing more.

"Enough," said Harbet at last. "We rise early." He motioned toward the door, and the villagers fairly scrambled to leave, parents gripping their children with stiff, white-knuckled fingers. They poured into the square, recoiled from the well, and crossed to their homes by hugging the cottages at the edge of the open space. They were quickly gone, flowing through the gaps between buildings like water through the mesh of a sieve, and the sound of many doors slamming, of many bolts being shot home echoed over the hills.

Harbet slammed his own door and shot its bolt, swung the shutters in and latched them also, and then he touched the coin that hung from the thong at his neck, and his ragged breathing calmed.

"You'll sleep on the children's cot," he said to Alaric, gesturing toward the larger of the two beds.

"No," said Zinovev. She stood in the far corner, behind the spinning wheel, her arms encircling all her sons. Her eyes were wide, and there was fear in them. "They will sleep in *our* bed, and I shall sleep with the children in theirs."

Harbet crossed his arms over his massive chest. "And where will *I* sleep?"

"At the door."

"At the door?"

"Yes. Guarding your family from all evil."

"This family is guarded well enough by that and that and that!" He pointed to the paint, the carvings, the trinkets hung on the walls.

The howling commenced once more, louder this time, and now Alaric was certain that he could make out words in that desolate cry. "Surely that is some human being wailing for aid!" he said, and he reached for the shutter latch, intending to throw the window open and look out.

Harbet stopped him with an iron hand on his shoulder. "We

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don't open them again once they're shut for the night."

"But someone is suffering out there!"

"I pray so," said Harbet.

"Husband, I can't bear it much longer!" Zinovev cried wildly, her hands clapped over her ears.

"Would you have me leave this village?" Harbet shouted.

She turned to the wall. "Perhaps it would be better."

"This is *my* village, *my* land, *my* people, and I won't leave them, do you hear me? I will never leave them! Let her howl every night! We will go on in spite of her! Oh, the evil day — the evil day that ever welcomed her!"

"Yes, yes, but lamenting the evil day resolves nothing!"

"Silence women! No more of this before our guests!"

"You will sleep at the door."

Harbet swore through clenched teeth. "Very well. I will sleep at the door. I will sleep on willow at the door."

Zinovev knelt by the larger of the two beds and dragged from beneath it a bulky comforter — an excessive stiffness and the many sharp points poking at the cloth surface from within betrayed a stuffing of twigs. She laid this pallet at the threshold and threw a light woolen coverlet over it. "Good night."

The howling ceased abruptly.

"You see," he said. "The very presence of willow at the door discourages her."

"Then we will keep it there every night." She herded the children into bed, banked the fire for the night, and blew out the candles that had been lit at sunset, leaving the room dim and red.

"Good sir," Alaric ventured, "who is it that you fear so greatly?"

"He who asks no questions learns no sorrow, minstrel," said Harbet. Dry twigs snapped loudly beneath his weight.

"I see," said Alaric. He lay back on his cot.

Mizella clung close. "We can't stay here," she whispered. "These people are mad or bewitched!"

A few feet away, the children giggled softly at some private joke.

"Neither," he replied. "Merely frightened, apparently of some madwomen who wanders about at night and howls." In the darkness, he could barely discern the silhouette of Zinovev as she undressed.

"May we leave in the morning?"

"Do you wish to travel on so quickly? To where?"

"Anywhere. Their fear suffocates me."

"There is nothing to be afraid of, and I would like to relax a few days and eat a stranger's food. Who knows what lies down the road? Let

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us take advantage of what we have here."

"Youth makes you fearless... and foolish."

"My fears require metal armor, not paint. Someday I will win you to my view, Mizella, and you will be happier knowing the world is empty of dark powers beyond the control of man."

"I am happy...and fearless with you, my lord." She kissed his neck and laid her head comfortably on his shoulder for sleep.

Am I the only one, Alaric wondered, *the only one who disbelieves now that Dall is dead?*

He slept and dreamed of formless shadows arching over him. But he dispelled them with a word: Solinde — and her pale face filled his world with light.

He woke to Mizella's touch. "Good morning, dear minstrel."

The door and windows were open, and Harbet's family was already at the table for a breakfast of barley porridge.

"Truly, I would like to sit outside in the sunlight," Alaric told his host.

Harbet scowled, "Well, if you must, come round to the smithy and sing to the beat of the hammer."

"I'll do that."

Zinovev smiled, and the children smiled, and it seemed to Alaric that last night must have been merely an extension of his dream. But the charms and carvings and carefully executed magical symbols on the wall assured him otherwise.

The smithy was a separate building with its own roaring fire and tall chimney; the implements of Harbet's trade hung on a wooden rack above the anvil, and a pile of iron bars waited on the bench to be forged into tools.

"While Papa builds up the fire, sing another song about knights, please, minstrel," said Pegwy, who had carried out a pair of stools for Alaric and Mizella. "I did so love the one last night!"

"You work the bellows, don't you?"

"Yes, but not at the beginning. Please, minstrel?"

Alaric sat just beyond the shade of the smithy roof and sang about knights and dragons and fair maidens. Villagers on their way to the fields stopped a moment to listen, women stood in their doorways or leaned on their windowsills to listen before beginning the day's labor indoors. Children carrying twin buckets of water strung from neck yokes paused on their way home from the spring and gazed with envious eyes at the headman's sons.

"You can stay with us tomorrow, minstrel!" called a plump, red-faced woman in a blue

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dress and cap. She waved from her doorway. "I have fresh-baked pumpkin pie, and honey for your tea!"

"I have veal stew!" cried another woman.

"And I have apple pie and strawberries!" offered a third.

Alaric bowed to each of them. "Thank you, good ladies. You make us feel welcome in your village." He leaned over to Mizella and muttered, "I suppose we're too far from civilization to expect hard money."

To listen to the song, Pegwy had sat down cross-legged on the hard-packed earth at Alaric's feet; now he jumped up at his father's summons. "I must work now, minstrel, and I won't be able to hear you above the sounds of the fire and the hammer, but will you sing another for me later? Another about knights and swords and horses?"

Alaric smiled and ruffled the boy's blond hair. "If you like, youngster."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, minstrel!" His grin seemed likely to burst his cheeks. "I hope you stay here a long time!" He skipped into the smithy and took up his place at the fire, where he pumped the bellows with a steady, even hand. His father laid a bar in the flames, waited till it turned red hot, then took it out and hammered, shedding a million red sparks over the anvil. Pegwy watched, learning his future trade, and he worked the bellows smoothly all the while.

"Hard labor," said Mizella.

"But profitable," Alaric returned. "When he grows up, he'll earn more in a day than I do in a month."

"Not here. In a city like Majinak perhaps, but not here."

"He'll be comfortable. I've never yet heard of a smith who starved. And he'll dream...of being a knight. The ones who love those songs...Dall told me that they always dreamed of being knights."

"You never dreamed of being a knight?"

"Not I. I've had a taste of the training involved — a minstrel's life promotes fewer sore muscles. One lives longer this way, too, and makes fewer enemies."

"Ah yes. Dear minstrel, you must have no enemies at all."

He shrugged. He'd never told her that he was exiled from Castle Royale for seducing the King's daughter. There was one enemy at least: the King himself, and the court magician also had little love for Alaric. Far behind, two enemies. And equally far behind, the young heir to the throne and the big-headed, bantering dwarf — friends who saved a foolish minstrel's life. And Solinde...her smile warm as sunlight...

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"I brought your luncheon for you," Pegwy said, startling the minstrel from his reverie. He bore two bread trenchers and a couple of chunks of cheese.

Alaric glanced up at the sky. "Is the sun so high already?"

"It's a little early," the child confessed, "but I thought if you ate now, you could play while I have *my* meal. Please?"

"Very well."

Pegwy ran back to the smithy and took up his task once more.

"I think I could make a minstrel of that boy," Alaric murmured.

"Children love music," said Mizella.

"Beyond that, this one has an interest...the same interest that led my master to take me on. I was older by a few years, but Pegwy is equally fascinated. See how he glances this way every few moments, as if to assure himself that we are still here? He would learn, I think. I wonder if he can sing."

"Have you need of an apprentice?"

"Need?" He nibbled at the cheese. "No minstrel has need till his voice begins to quaver with age — then he requires an apprentice to earn his bread for him. No, Dall had no need when he taught me, but he knew a loneliness that only another voice could lighten. One voice, he told me, could never sing harmony to itself."

"I'm sorry I can't sing, Alaric."

He leaned over to squeeze her arm. "Dall was far older than I am now; I still have too much pride to let another share the audience's attention with me. If I were...say... twice my present age, I might think of taking the boy, but not now. I hope I meet another like him *then*."

"His parents would scarcely allow it anyway," Mizella said, nodding toward the smithy, where Harbet hammered till sweat glistened all over his naked torso.

Alaric examined her face intently, calculated the direction of her gaze. "You want him, don't you? You want him for a son."

"He's a pretty child."

"A bit old to be *my* son."

"Just the right age to be mine." She sighed. "I wish you could give me a son, dear minstrel, or a daughter. I wish someone could give me a babe."

He put his arms around her and held her close, petting her hair.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "You're too young to be bothered about such things. Never mind, never mind."

"The reason — the ultimate reason why I would not even ask his parents is that...the fewer who know about me, the better." He tilted her face up and kissed her

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lips. "Consider me your child," he said with a grin.

"I do."

"Incestuous wench."

"It's true, sometimes. Sometimes you are my son and sometimes my father. The way you speak and act — you're a strange mixture of old and young."

"That comes of leading the life I've led and knowing the folk I've known. And possessing the talent I possess..." He hugged her. "Enough, Mizella, before your flattery turns my head."

"Yes, enough. The sun is bright and hot; perhaps we can move into the shade now? And I think our young friend is waiting for another song."

Pegwy had approached quietly, and now he stretched out on the ground before them. He gobbled his midday meal.

"More knights?" said Alaric, taking up his lute.

Pegwy nodded eagerly, and then he added, "Unless you wish to sing some other kind of song."

"I've a bag full of knights and ten bags full of dragons — they take up so much more space. Once a dragon lived in the great forest, just beyond the smallest, newest village in the whole land..."

Eventually, Pegwy's father called him back to the forge.

"Let's stroll about the village," Alaric suggested, offering his arm to Mizella. She accepted, and they strolled. "I wonder what it is about the well that makes them avoid it so completely." He guided their footsteps toward the square.

"Evil spirits dried it up," Mizella replied.

"Yes, but they've daubed it thoroughly with charms against enchantment — surely it's harmless to them by now, or even beneficial."

She shrugged. "These things take time to fade. On the manor where I grew up, there was a tree blasted by the Dark One, and for years no one would go near it, but eventually the evil wore off and we could pass it without harm."

"Lightning?"

"Of course."

"Then you could have passed it the next day with no harm, as long as the weather was clear. Tall trees attract lightning, like tall towers — the Dark One has nothing to do with it."

"Oh, Alaric, I wish I had your certainty."

Alaric smiled. "Surely if the Dark One existed, *I* would know him." Softly, he hummed the tune that was running through his head, about a white magician who chased the Dark One to his lair demanding concessions, only to inadvertently bind himself to evil. They had approached the well in a long spiral, and now he leaned against

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it. The square was deserted, and most of the windows facing it were closely shuttered; the few ajar showed darkness within. "You see," he said, "there's nothing to be afraid of."

Abruptly, the howling began, nearer than ever before, and the words were plain: "Help me, help me, help me..."

"It's in the well!" gasped Mizella, backing away in shock.

"In the well..." Alaric placed his ear against the boards that covered the opening, and he could clearly hear the words which came from directly below.

"Help me, please help me, please help me..."

"Someone's down the well!" he shouted to the empty square and the shuttered windows. "Someone's down the well!" With his bare hands he tugged at the longest board of the cover, but it was nailed fast with spikes driven deep into mortared stones. "Help, help!" he cried. "Someone's in the well! Mizella, run for help!"

Help came, a dozen hands, and they dragged Alaric inside the headman's house.

"Kill him!" a man was screaming. "Kill him before he brings us more ill fortune!"

"Yes, kill him and throw him in with her," said another. "He touched it; we dare not let him live!"

"Wait!" shouted Alaric, and he struggled as they bound him to the bed in which he had slept the previous night. The ropes were coarse and prickly and rasped his skin. "What's going on here!"

They shoved Mizella into a corner and stood before her, their bodies the bars of her prison. She kicked one of them in the kneecap and was rewarded with a slap that knocked her back against the wall.

Harbet stamped into the room. "What is happening in my house?" he roared. A dozen men gabbled at him in explanation; then he raised his hand for silence. He glared down at Alaric. "So you're a friend of hers?"

"You treat a guest very poorly, Harbet," Alaric said in a cold, even tone. "Of whom do you think I am a friend?"

"Her. The witch Artuva."

"I don't know her."

"Then what were you doing fooling around at the well?"

"I heard a voice crying for help, my host. I tried to give it, as would any normal man. Someone is down the well!"

"We know that."

"Then in the name of all that's good, why don't you rescue the poor unfortunate?"

"It is the witch Artuva. We put her there, and there she'll stay till she rots!"

The full horror of it sickened

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Alaric. To be shut up in a dark hole in the ground! "What did she do," he gasped, "to merit such punishment?"

"Enough and more than enough. Pretending to be a midwife, she killed my youngest child at birth, and for that, if nothing else, she must die. You'll not save her, minion of that Dark One."

"Me? I'm no one's minion. I'm a minstrel."

"Lies!" shouted Harbet. "I knew when first I laid eyes on you that you were a witch just like her!"

From the corner came Mizella's sobs.

"Don't be frightened, dear lady," Alaric said. "And you who struck her —"

"Throw him in the well!" said the threatened man. "Throw him in the well before he bewitches us!"

"He'll not bewitch us," Harbet muttered. He ripped open the twig-stuffed comforter and strewed dry wood and crushed willow leaves over Alaric's body.

A cry from the doorway startled the gathering. "Oh, Harbet, what have you done?" Zinovev, returned home from a neighborly visit. She ran to the bedside and stopped there, one hand raised to her mouth. "I heard, but I could not believe. Harbet, he is our *guest!*"

"And a fouler guest we have never hosted."

"He was curious about the well, Harbet. Who wouldn't be curious about all this?" With a sweeping gesture she indicated the carvings and paint and willow and onions and the whole village. "This is laughable, Harbet — as laughable as it is mysterious. Let him go, let her out, set her free. She's proved that she's stronger than we are."

"She'll die in the winter. She can't conjure a fur coat out of nothing."

Zinovev touched his arm. "She's conjured food out of nothing for two months."

"Silence wife! It can't go on forever, else why send for rescue?"

"Rescue? This boy is no rescue. When the Dark One sends a rescue, he'll send fire and flood and pestilence on us all. He'll come in a fiery chariot drawn by snakes and vultures. He'll leave this land barren to punish us, if he does not carry us all off alive to his kingdom. He'll not send a man and a woman with one horse between them!"

"How do you know?"

Zinovev gazed down at Alaric with tears in her eyes. "His voice is so beautiful. The Dark One is ugly and speaks with the voice of the crow and the frog, not with the voice of the lute."

"Bah! He's a pretty boy. I can see *that* well enough."

Zinovev frowned at him. "So you'll murder him. You might as

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well be in the service of the Dark One yourself."

"He's a witch."

"He's a young man with an understandable curiosity. Oh, Harbet, you're a fool. I won't live with a fool any longer. My mother's village will welcome me, I am sure."

He caught her arm, bent it behind her back, making her wince. "You'll not desert me now, wife. We'll save this village — the destruction of evil will make us blessed."

"Not murder of the innocent!"

He threw her to the floor with a growl. His sons had come to the door, and they watched the proceedings with wide eyes.

"You've made a terrible mistake, Harbet," said Alaric. "Redeem yourself by setting us free."

The headman laughed mirthlessly. "We'll burn them," he said. "We should have burned the old woman, too."

"Drag her out and burn her with them," said one of the crowd.

Harbet eyed the speaker. "You drag her out, Nagwyn."

Nagwyn glanced at the floor, his lips pursed.

"Who else might be willing to bring the witch out of the well? Ledek? Blas?"

The men named looked uncertainly at one another. They shuffled their feet, and the sweat of fear trickled down their faces.

Harbet clenched his fists. "Leave her," he said firmly. "She'll have to summon the Dark One himself and *all* his minions to escape that prison. These two we'll burn, and we'll take their ashes on a pilgrimage to Arnara — for burial where they'll never be able to harm a living soul. And from Arnara, we will bring back to our village a bit of holy soil to protect us all forever." He gazed from man to man. "Is there any better notion?"

"Arnara is far," said Nagwyn.

"Shall I lay the ashes at your doorstep?" Harbet thundered.

"Well, who will go?" Nagwyn muttered sullenly.

"I will go."

Zinovev clutched at his leg. "You'll die on that holy ground!" she screamed. "No murderer could visit Arnara and live! Harbet, please, for the children —"

He shook her free with a kick. "Come, neighbors, we'll pick them up and carry them out to burn, bed and all!"

"Alaric!" wailed Mizella, as two men laid hands on her.

The bed was empty, the ropes limp without their captive.

Harbet gestured reflexively against evil spirits, and before the sign was complete, Alaric had returned, unbound, standing, a sword in his hand. The villagers were frozen, expressions of horror on their faces, hands trembling,

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half-raised to amulets or mystic embroidery on their clothing. Mizella was frozen, too, but only for an instant; then she turned, wrenched free of her guards, drove her fist up into the groin of the man who had struck her, bloodied the nose of his partner, and ducked between them to reach the minstrel. Alaric caught her on the run, lifted her as the villagers broke from their shock, shouted, closed in...

...on nothing.

South of the village, the forest was cool and shady. Mizella leaned against a tree, breathing raggedly. "I will never become accustomed to that mode of travel, but I am very grateful that it exists."

Alaric let the point of his sword drop to the ground. "I wish it hadn't been necessary. If only I had been able to reason with them... Now Harbet is quite certain he was right." His lips curved into a wry smile. "And yet, I've always wanted to do something like that. Only in the last few years have I had the ability, the control, to accomplish it."

Mizella looked up, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

He touched the tree, ran his hand over the rough bark. "Once, as a child — I think I was six years old — I was leaning against a tree much like this one, about the same height and size. I decided to travel to another part of the wood near my foster parents' home. This was before I ran away. I thought of the place at which I wished to be, and I was there in an instant — and beside me was the selfsame tree I had left behind, all crowded up against another that had not previously been beside it. I was surprised indeed, and even more surprised when it fell over and shattered into a million pieces. It was only the bark of the tree, you see — I had only taken the bark with me and left the rest behind, naked and pale. I had power, but only the barest skill at using it. Imagine what I could have done to another human being."

"Your skill has improved with age, though, and with practice. You rescued me, both of us, from Trif..."

"I wasn't sure I could do that. I wasn't sure I could take all of you with me. I'd had some bad luck with a piece of sheeting not long before...but I couldn't leave you there for him."

Mizella shivered and hugged herself with crossed arms. "I'm glad I didn't know. And yet...you could do it wilfully, could you not? You could go back to the village and tear Harbet's body apart."

He glanced down at the roots of the tree, touched one with the tip of his sword. "I could, but I won't."

"He was going to kill us!"

"But he didn't kill us. I'll admit

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he deserves to be punished, and not merely for what he did and tried to do to us; but he has a family to care for, a whole village dependent on him." His lips pursed, whitened for a moment. "I have never drawn human blood with this sword. I am not an executioner."

"I'd kill him." Her cheeks flushed. "If I could, I'd kill the whole lot of them."

"They won't forget you, especially the one you nearly castrated."

"No." She smiled, self-satisfied, an unpleasant sort of smile.

Alaric sighed, his mind and heart shying away from her hate. He pitied the villagers in their ignorance and panic; he had never feared them. "Mizella?" He propped the sword against the tree, then took her hands between his own. "Mizella, I have to go back for the horse...and more."

"The lute," she said, nodding. "You left the lute behind, too. It's lying on the stool by the smithy."

"More than the lute." He squeezed her fingers. "I have to get her out of the well."

She looked up into his eyes. "I know. I've known since we heard her voice. You don't believe in witches, and therefore she's just a suffering woman. But, Alaric, she's been down in that well for two months! She *must* be a witch!"

"There's another explanation. There has to be."

"Perhaps she has your power and steals her food that way?"

His eyebrows lifted. "Then why is she still in the well?"

"She must have her reasons!"

"Then I'll ask her for them. Tonight."

"They're frightened — they may already be killing her."

"I think not; their very fear will keep them from it. But to make doubly sure, I'll watch till sunset from safety high on the hill."

Dusk. Alaric appeared behind Harbet's house, in full view of the smithy, where he had not dared to go earlier. The stools were gone, as was his lute, probably taken into the headman's house, possibly burned by now as a witch's token; he winced at the loss of Solinde's silken favor, berated himself for leaving it unattended, and vowed to make a thorough search later, after this night's work was done and after the household was soundly asleep. The smithy was barred, quiet. Without disturbing the door, he ducked inside, secured an iron bar, and came out. Stepping lightly, ready to vanish at the slightest noise, he rounded the house.

The square was dark, save for the pale light of a crescent moon. The windows and doors of the villagers' homes were tight shut, and no one was abroad. Softly, Alaric went to the well and, with

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the bar as a lever, began to pry up the cover.

A tiny sound made him flit to the safety of the shadows between two houses. One of the shutters at a nearby cottage opened slightly, and a small figure climbed out. Alaric guessed it was a child, but he could not discern its precise identity. The figure approached the well, lifted one of the boards, then lowered it. Alaric waited till the child returned through the shutter, then ventured out again.

He tested all of the boards gently; one proved loose at the near end, and he lifted it. "I'm a friend," he whispered into the deeper darkness of the well. "Please trust me and be silent." There was no answer. He pried at the other boards, and they gave with tiny squeaks. He laid the slats carefully on the ground. "Stand aside, I'm coming down." He felt certain that her thoroughly dark-adapted eyes would perceive his silhouette against the less dark sky. He swung his legs over the side of the well and lowered himself into the abyss. A parched, musty smell assailed his nostrils; the well was indeed dry as dust. Bracing his back against one side of the shaft, his feet against the other, he inched his way downward. At last, a hand touched him.

"This is the bottom, friend." And old, old woman's voice, less a whisper than a croak. "You are the singer, are you not?"

"Yes, good lady."

"I hoped a stranger would have pity...But where is your rope?"

"We've no need of a rope, my good lady. Allow me to put my arms around you, and we shall leave this place in an instant."

"What? You'll carry me up as you came down? Sir, you jest."

For answer, Alaric circled her with his arms and lifted; he found her wispy-light, lighter even than Mizella, and he knew there would be no difficulty.

Mizella had started a fire and gathered handfuls of wild blackberries for their refreshment. By firelight, the lady of the well was shriveled and bent-backed, a tiny woman made tinier by her crouching posture. She blinked at the fire and shielded her eyes with her right hand, in which she clutched a chunk of cold roast meat. Her skin and hair were dirty, encrusted with dirt, as were the voluminous rags that formed her clothing.

"I had given up hope," she said, and she sank to the ground, shaking with sobs, her eyes shut tight.

Mizella took the old woman in her arms and crooned the words a mother used to comfort an unhappy child. Alaric went to the barn where Lightfoot was still

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stabled, found the water flask still hung on his saddle, and filled it from a brook many miles and days away — the villagers had spoken of a spring on the far side of their hill, but Alaric had never seen it and thus could not travel to the place in his own manner. This other water source, however, was not far for one such as he. He had been gone but a few moments when he returned to hand the full container to Mizella, who soaked a strip of her petticoat and wiped the old woman's face with it.

"Thank you, thank you," whispered the oldster. "I have had so little water...How long was I down there?"

"They said two months," Alaric told her. "How did you manage to survive?" He already had an inkling of her answer.

"The children, the wonderful children. In the middle of the night they brought me water and food — crusts and meat scraps and whatever other tidbits they could steal, but still a feast for a starving woman. The children...and especially little Pegwy, may the holy ones bless him."

Alaric glanced at Mizella. "They never suspected their own children. They thought that when the doors and windows were barred for the night that none would dare venture out."

The woman raised her eyes to him. "Lord, I thank you for saving me, and I beg to know how I may be of service to you."

"I wish no service, good lady." He knelt beside her. "I could not leave you in the well."

"You used your magic for my benefit, lord, and I owe you magic in return. I can read your life line in the sticks..." From the bosom of her ragged dress she brought forth a bundle of polished wooden rods, each inscribed delicately with worn mystic symbols. She held them out to him in one hand, having dropped the meat to the grass before her; her other arm was hidden completely by her rags, as if guarding the place from which the sticks had been drawn.

"Then the villagers were right," said Mizella, recoiling a bit. "You *are* a witch."

A look of fear crossed the woman's face. "I have a skill, taught me by my mother, taught her by her mother before her. We are respected women in my homeland."

"You tell fortunes," said Alaric, and he reached out to reassure Mizella with a touch.

"Yes."

"Harbet said you were a midwife, that you killed his youngest child at birth."

She pulled the sticks back, close to her breast. "We are midwives in my family, and we read the life line

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of every newborn babe. It was a sickly child — I needed no sticks to tell me it would did. I did not cause its death, but they put me in the well anyway. They blamed the bandits on me, and the recent drought, as if such things were under a poor old woman's control."

"I know they are not," said Alaric.

"I'm sure of that, lord, for you are a man of power. Shall I read your future?"

"No. I have no wish to know it, and I must find our supper now. Make ready to roast a chicken, Mizella."

"Don't forget to find a knife somewhere," she said. "I don't relish the notion of tearing its entrails out with my fingers."

He was gone, air clapping in its rush to fill the void where his body had been.

He returned with a live chicken. "Courtesy of an old friend who mounts no guard on a well-locked coop." He produced a knife. "From a certain smithy."

The old woman stared at him with wide eyes and open mouth. "I thought we had flown," she whispered. "Lord, you are mighty indeed! Only once before have I seen magic such as this. The bane of my life! To think that it has saved me now..."

"What do you mean?" said Alaric, his voice tense. This was the first person he had ever met who claimed to have seen his talent used before. He gripped her shoulder a bit too tightly. "You've seen someone go as I have done? Where? When?"

She gasped at the pain of his fingers. "Lord, my bones break easily!"

By a supreme act of will, he forced his fingers to relax. "Tell me," he said. "Oh, good lady, tell me!"

"It was years ago...a child...I delivered his mother of him, and as I slapped his rump to make him suck air and live, he screamed and...vanished."

"When? When?"

"His father was the baron. He banished me forever from the land of my birth, and I have wandered ever since. Woe to the day I ever set foot in this land, where they fear my skill instead of respecting it!"

"When?" Alaric demanded. "When were you banished?"

She dropped the sticks into the grass before her knees and counted on them silently. "So long," she wailed. "Sixteen years have I wandered!"

"Sixteen years!" He glanced at Mizella, who had wrung the chicken's neck and now singed the feathers at the edge of the fire. She stopped for a moment.

"Why, Alaric," she murmured, "you are..."

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"Where is this country?" Alaric cried. "Do you know if the parents are still alive, if they have any other children? Tell me!" He reached for her arms, to shake the information from her, and the sleeves of her garment fell back, revealing both arms completely for the first time. One was shorter than the other — it bore no hand.

The old woman jerked her arms away from him and hugged them to her bosom. "He took my hand when he disappeared! He crippled me! He took my hand and caused the baron to banish me! Oh, the blood, the blood! I thought I was going to die; the baron made me thrust it into the fire to cauterize it, and then I wanted to die from the pain..." She bent over and rocked back and forth, weeping at the memory. "I did nothing. Why did he banish me? He was not a superstitious man; he knew I was innocent. He must have known! He saw me cast no spell, make no magical motions. I was the victim and the child was the sorcerer!"

Hesitantly, Alaric moved closer to her, put his arms around her trembling shoulders. "I...I'm sorry." His throat swelled shut, and he could barely choke out the words. "It was I who did this to you. I was that child. I'm so sorry..."

She lifted her head to stare uncomprehendingly.

"The slap — you say you slapped me — it must have startled and frightened me. I went without knowing how to use this power of mine. I was found naked on a hill far, far to the east of here, your hand still clutching my ankle. Your hand..." He held her tighter. "Forgive me, forgive me, good lady. I didn't know...I couldn't know..."

"You..." she whispered. "You... the child?"

"Yes. I'm sure of that."

She gazed down at the stump of her arm. She touched it with her right hand, tucked the rags more closely about it. "I owe you my life," she said. "You...the child?" She peered into his face. "Lord, you do resemble the baron. What strange fortune it is...that you took my life away once, and now you give it back."

Alaric nodded, unable to answer.

Mizella stood behind him, laid her hands on his head. "Your mother, Alaric. You can find her now."

"I can find her now," he echoed. "Is she alive?"

"I don't know," said the old woman. "I have been gone for sixteen years."

"You'll take me home."

"Oh, I can't! I was banished!"

"Think of it as a quest, a sixteen-year-long quest. And now you've found what you were

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searching for. Surely your exile will end when you bring it back."

"I don't know." She raised her hand to her mouth, plucked at her lower lip.

He gripped that hand. "Guide me home."

"Home." She smiled suddenly. "Yes, we'll go home. I'll see my sister, my brothers..."

"Home," said Mizella, her fingers on Alaric's cheek. "Home that you've never seen since the first moment of life. A baron's son..."

"A baron's son," said Alaric. "I wonder what kind of man the baron is. And whether he'll want a witch for a child..."

"He'll want a witch like you," Mizella said.

"I wonder." He leaned back against her and looked up into her face above his. "I'm frightened," he said. "But I'm going home anyway. Your intuition has been so accurate of late; what does it say about that?"

"It tells me you have great courage."

"Or great stupidity." He smiled faintly. "I hope I won't have to steal many more chickens along the way."

But his mind, far from being concerned with chickens, was turning over the possibility that a baron's son might look to a king's daughter with a passion that was not completely hopeless.

7
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Defying all laws of probability, it has never been pointed out in science fiction publications that the world of professional science fiction writers is a very small world indeed. Virtually within months of a promising writer's appearance in print, he or she will have to know other science fiction writers and within a year, any writer who has made even the smallest splash will find admittance to the "inner circle" accomplished without even an invitation. We all know each other; some of us have known one another for twenty years, and *we're* considered the newcomers. God knows how long Edmond Hamilton and Clifford Simak have been friends. But because of this happily incestuous writerhood, it becomes inevitable that friends will be reviewing the books of friends, enemies will be reviewing the works of enemies, and every possible permutation of that situation has at one time or another appeared in print.

Outsiders may wonder at such a state of literary criticism, and wonder again if it permits honesty. How, they may ask, can a Harry Harrison, close as a brother to a Brian Aldiss, comment objectively on a new Aldiss novel? How can a Lester del Rey, associated with a

HARLAN ELLISON

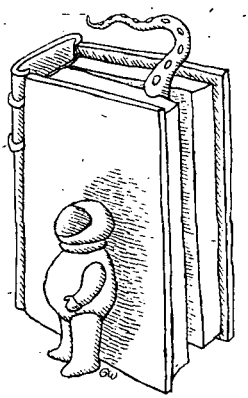
Books

Breakfast of Champions by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Delacorte/Seymour Lawrence, $7.95

The Doomsday Gene by John Boyd, Weybright and Talley, $5.95

Mister Justice by Doris Piserchia, Ace, $.95

Stonehenge by Harry Harrison and Leon E. Stover, Scribners, $5.95



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Frederik Pohl since the Thirties, be dispassionate about the new Pohl effort? How can an Ellison, admittedly willing to perform any favor for a buddy like Ben Bova, be expected to view a new Bova novel with anything even remotely approaching dispassion?

They would have to be outsiders to ask the questions. As close as I am to Robert Silverberg or Samuel Delany or Norman Spinrad, I have no doubt whatsoever that if I wrote a stinker, they would hang me out to dry without a moment's hesitation. And they have, all three of them. It in no way lessens our friendship.

In the union of writers, particularly writers of the imaginative, there is an unspoken rule that when the hat of the critic is donned, all friendships and enmities are set aside, and the *word* is the sole item judged and commented upon. Yet there have been occasions when fans of a certain writer, seeing a negative review by another writer, have concluded the reviewer was honing some personal axe at the expense of the writer under scrutiny. I'm sure it's happened, but the cases are few and far between; fewer and farther between than in the "mainstream," where opinions can be bought like strings of onions.

I offer these preliminary comments not only to reassure readers to whom such thoughts might have occured, but to preamble what will be essentially negative reviews of both Kurt Vonnegut's new novel, *Breakfast of Champions,* and John Boyd's *The Doomsday Gene.* Kurt and I have known each other for many years, and until this novel I have been a slavishly adoring disciple of his writing. Mr. Boyd and I have met only twice, but I've found him to be a serious and conscientious writer, a gentleman, and a man of great personal warmth and kindness.

Having, I hope, established the ground rules for the reviews that follow, it is only fair to add that I have met Doris Piserchia, whose first novel, *Mister Justice,* is hereunder reviewed, and I have known Harry Harrison who, with Leon E. Stover, wrote *Stonehenge,* also reviewed here, since I was a teen-ager. Their personal feelings about me I don't know, but I like *them,* and what is said here is said about the *works,* not the authors.

Before-the-fact apologia always make me nervous when I read them, and I recognize the risk I take in inserting same, but since Posterity is always snorting in the background, it seems wonderfully appropriate (not to mention self-serving) to do the insertion here.

Breakfast of Champions, Kurt Vonnegut's eleventh book (his seventh novel) seems to me a very

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sad pile of pages. It reads like "A Child's Garden of Arch and Coy Cynicism." It lacks the genuine warmth and concern for humanity that *all* of Kurt's other books exhibit with such clarity. It is sloppily written, puffed out with adolescent drawings by the author that may charm the hell out of academic literary leeches like Robert Scholes, but seem to me merely an idle indulgence by a man who never really wanted to write this book...and it reeks of sophomoric philosophy. I cannot concern myself, as either reader or reviewer, that the book is now number 1 on the bestseller lists. To that I say *splendid!* No writer going — with the possible exceptions of Tom Disch, R.A. Lafferty or Philip José Farmer — more justly deserves a bestseller and total freedom from the genre ghetto of sf. Were this the best of all possible, one might wish he had achieved mass appeal with *Cat's Cradle* or *The Sirens of Titan,* either one of which put this clinker down the tube, but he didn't, and it isn't the best of anydamnthing, so we can only wish Kurt Godspeed and deserved success, and enough ego-boost (not to mention money) so he can write the books he *wants* to write. But this one strangles on its own cuteness. It is a precocious but essentially obnoxious child pirouetting in the center of its parents' Anniversary Party, demanding, "Looka me! Looka me!"

Sadly, it will draw all that attention, and more.

If you perceive that I have neither dealt with plot nor characters in this critique, it is only out of a firm belief that one should not write down to one's audience. You will all read this book, if you haven't already. You will travel with sf writer Kilgore Trout across the United States to the Midland City Festival for the Arts, you will meet Dwayne Hoover and Patty Keene and Rabo Karabekian and Cyprian Ukwende and Wayne Hoobler and learn less about them than you might have wished to know. You will also meet Kurt Vonnegut, and learn *more* about him than you wished to know. So I will not bore you, as long stretches of this book will bore you, nor will I talk down to you, as long stretches of this book talk down to the reader. I will merely tag off by saying that, for me, there is great pain revealed in the writing of *Breakfast of Champions.* The pain of a writer inundated by long-deserved and too-frequently-uncritical success, forced by circumstance, publisher pressure, the blood-lust of the mob or his own insecurities to complete a book he had long-before clearly decided he did not wish to write.

In some ways, as Kurt indicates in the book, this one is a

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tombstone. Pray the Dark Gods permit this finest phoenix to rise from his own ashes.

I have before me three remaining books to be reviewed. Here. In this magazine devoted to fantasy and science fiction. Only one of them, strictly speaking, is science fiction. And not for the first time I realize with what dismay old-line readers and fans of *scientifiction* view the current product labeled sf. At the same time I view with awe the incredibly wide horizon that has opened for our genre. From Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., way over there, to Harry Harrison way over here; with John Boyd somewhere in the center holding the good thought for traditional sf, and giving the old-liners hope that all is not lost.

Boyd writes a linear story, ringing changes on some of the tried and tested sf conventions, and he has made a name for himself with a publisher who has clearly wagered heavily that their lone entry into the sf lists will be a winner. Perhaps they've chosen correctly; there is a sizeable Boyd following. His eight books (commencing with *The Last Starship From Earth* in 1968) have drawn both a critical and popular audience to his name; all have sold well to paperback, and it seems inevitable that Boyd's work is destined for translation to the visual media.

Unfortunately, I cannot count myself among that large and literate audience that finds stimulation in Mr. Boyd's writings. For me they are tedious, pedestrian, ambivalent and ultimately forgettable. At best they seem to me the bases for reasonably interesting short stories or novelettes but, blown up to 200+ pages, they have been ordeals for me to fight my way through.

The Doomsday Gene is a perfect case in point. Within four pages of the opening of this latest Boyd novel, the wholly irrational and unbelievable idea of a "Thanatos Syndrome Factor" is introduced — fishing in the gene pool for genetic traits that will produce an individual who will come to optimum societal contribution level early in life and then, like a May fly, die immediately thereafter — and nothing more is done with the core idea for almost one hundred and fifty pages. Rather than dealing with the basic concept, Mr. Boyd introduces a female viewpoint character who spends most of her time acting silly and finds herself left out of all the pivotal action of the story so Mr. Boyd can deceive the reader (in a manner that would not be tolerated for a minute in detective fiction) and avoid having to deal with the

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central protagonist, Amal Severn, the bearer of the Doomsday Gene. For one hundred and fifty pages Mr. Boyd has his silly lady, Lyn Oberlin, dash about worrying herself to a frazzle about Amal, and in the closing pages of the novel we find everything we've been told is misdirection, and events have had a preordained conclusion.

There is a circa 1934 rural American town, there is a super-secret Eugenics Surveillance organization, there is a humdrum love story, there is a great deal of earthquake and seismological gobbledygook...and none of it very much in aid of the idea that originally sold this novel to the publisher. And how it do go on. And on.

One is forced to slough through narration like this (page 140): "For a moment Lyn stood on the bank of the pond, only a placid sheet of water to a casual eye but so much more to a girl who, in its waters, had first been touched by the magic wand of love. Forcibly she turned her gaze away and followed the path toward the mill, the meadow, and the hillock, scene of the first and only consummation of her love for Amal. However brief that consummation, she was beginning to suspect it might be commemorated by something more than a diamond ring and a promise of marriage."

One is dizzied at the attempt of Mr. Boyd to reconcile his own attitudes toward what is "hip" and what is "square" by snippets like this (page 2): "...taking all evidence of the Thanatos Syndrome Factor with him. Speaking of the T.S. Factor, a whimsical antiquarian on my staff tells me that 'T.S.' in World War II slang stood for an expression which politely translates as 'tough sugar,' or, 'that's all, brother.'" and this (page 176): "She was not hip enough in Zen to recognize the symptoms of satori but she hoped he at least might be zazzing a koan." The former is square to the point of being hincty, the latter as *au courant* as a George Carlin routine.

A self-conscious attempt at archness is this gem (page 44): "...Lyn knew the Emersons were literary historians finishing up a two-year grant in Dotham. They had come to study the origins of science fiction, a remote literary excrudescence which had frothed briefly to the surface of twentieth-century literature before it was scummed off by scientific advances which had turned the genre's romantic conjecturings into low-comedy realism." Oh, *really?!* And the Emersons had gone to the circa 1934 Alabama town to "study the origins" of sf. They would have done better to go to 1926 New York for a chat with Hugo Gernsback.

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But worst of all, *The Doomsday Gene* rambles and wanders and stumbles through a series of essentially dull episodes that pad out a simple, direct short story. Such efforts were standard in the Forties and Fifties when we were writing for a penny a word and people "ejaculated vociferously with wondering awe" (5 cents) instead of merely "said" (1 cent), but this kind of writing hardly suffices in the Age of Malzberg.

I must confess it took me over four weeks to read this novel, and I do not look forward to a similar experience. It was hell.

Heaven, however, presents itself, somewhat flawed by the incredible stupidities of the Ace Books & Butchery Company editorial practices, in the form of Doris Piserchia's first novel, *Mister Justice.*

Ms. Piserchia is easily one of the most interesting new writers to come down the pike in this, the Age of Malzberg; and for her first outing she has selected a tasty idea: a time-traveling vigilante who enforces law'n'order by hopping around the clock and killing off those who have escaped the long arm of the law. The novel is written in a strange and almost surrealistic manner, with fascinating characters (like Godiva, a statuesque assassin who kills her prey by literally love-hugging them to death) popping in and out to sensational effect. The plot is complex, the writing graceful and yet forceful, every page crammed with originality or ideas and a verve for the craft of writing that hasn't been seen since W.S. Merwin first set pencil to paper.

If there are carps, they are minor when directed toward Ms. Piserchia: a scent of sexism (yes, even women commit the sin), a trifle of muddiness and overcomplication in the plotting, and a nervous-making feeling that Ms. Piserchia *really* believes that if the Law doesn't do the job, righteous vigilantes should take the lynch rope in their hands.

When it comes to major carps against this splendid book, they must be leveled at the publisher, however. At the final moments of writing, Ms. Piserchia was informed by Ace that what she'd thought was to be a single novel was going to have to be shoehorned into half of one of the Ace Doubles. For this reason, the book ends abruptly with barely time to knit up the raveled sleeve of logic. It is a mending job unsatisfactorily done, and no fault of the author. There are important and fascinating questions left unanswered, technical explanations never made, characters who have figured pivotally who suddenly vanish

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offstage, their fates left in doubt. It is one of the more frustrating episodes in recent publishing history, and a subjugation of Art to the vagaries of inept publishing that demands censure.

My sympathies go out to Ms. Piserchia, who should have had the strength of belief in her own enormous talent to resist the decrees of the butchers at Ace; and my strongest recommendations go out to those who enjoy stimulating sf, to pick up this Ace Double which might otherwise escape their attention (despite an absolutely *splendid* Kelly Freas cover). Doris Piserchia is a name we will see often and to telling effect in the next few years.

And last, and in some ways least, we come to Harry Harrison's and Leon Stover's *Stonehenge*, which squeaks into a review column in a magazine devoted to sf and fantasy, really, only because Harry is one of our good old boys, and Leon Stover knows his apples when it comes to anthropology, and if you can't review your friends what the hell's it all about anyhow, right, Chollie?

But if you want the truth, apart from being a pretty thumping good barbarian historical novel, with just teensy touches of peripherally-allied trappings to the world of fantasy like the quivering (but not quite sinking) of Atlantis, the building of the Salisbury Plain enigma and some typical mighty-thews hack'n'slobber swordstuff... this book has no business being reviewed here. It is Mythopoeic Society fare, Everests above the usual *Thongor at the Mound of Venus* bilge, but a straight historical nonetheless.

It opens in Mycenae, with the son of Perimedes, the Mycenaean king, whose name is Ason, having been captured by the bad guys, who are, of course, the Atlanteans. Now there's this mine in Celtic Britain from which Perimedes gets tin to make his "holy bronze," and it's one of the big deals in Perimedes' life. So when Ason's uncle, Lycos, is killed when the head-trophying Yerni attack and pillage the mine, Ason swears vengeance. But the only trouble is, Ason is in a pretty bad way himself. You see, he's trapped in an Atlantean dungeon, and he thinks they're going to kill him any minute, except they come and take him to a sort of Atlantis-style massage parlor where they rub oil into his body and hair (yick!), and then while he's lying there, this slave from Byblos name of Aias, who is a kind of honky Woody Strode, comes up to him and tells him he's going to have to learn how to pugil, because this Atlantean pugilistic champ named Themis is set to pound the crap out

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of him for the delight of Atlas, the head honcho of Atlantis, in the courtyard just yonder *dorten*. So in about eight minutes (35 lines of type) Aias teaches Ason what he knows and Ason goes out there... and gets the crap pounded out of him. But then, in the grand tradition of Thomas Hardy coincidence, just as Themis is about to break his bones for the edification of the dandies, a volcano goes off and buildings start falling like Chicken Little's paranoid delusion, and Ason — no Jack Armstrong, he! — picks up a chunk of masonry and drives it through Themis's skull. After which Ason takes on half a dozen armed and armored guards, gets away with the help of this Egyptian named Inteb, who has kind of a groin-itch for Ason and...

Well, it goes from there, and what with Ar Apa (who sounds like he should be an sf fan amateur press association but who is in reality an axe-wielding Celt with a taste for brain-smashing, bragging and eating burnt ox) and Naikeri, who likes to get *shtupped* in the mud ("Thrusting deep as he would thrust a sword into a man's vitals. Taking her as he would take this island of the Yerni." Harry, how *could* you?!), and a cast of thousands...all unwashed, it rollicks on its merry and improbable way, and I don't *ever* want to hear Harry say a bad word about *Soylent Green*.

The back cover is loaded with quotes from people like Carleton S. Coon and Naomi Mitchison and (surprise!) Brian Aldiss about how interesting this book is as a supposition about B.C. times and how Stonehenge got built, but as far as I can tell it's just a pretty good, fast-reading and frivolous bash'n'broadsword novel full of ancient words you have to look up in the Oxford English.

I enjoyed the hell out of it, but then, what do I know? I'm a friend of Harry's. But as a friend of Harry's, I'm privy to "inner circle" information which, because this is the Season of Watergate I'll pass on to you.

Harry and Leon Stover sold this book first in England, at 110,000 words, and had trouble re-selling it here in America, so the British said, "Let us cut it a little," to make it more saleable, and Harry reluctantly said okay, and they circumcised the book down to 80,000 words and sold the original plates to Scribner's, who published it at the dwarf size, with all the British spellings and single ' quotation marks, and the damned thing reads so fast it's over before you start reading. About which good old Harry is very pissed.

But what does *he* know? He's a friend of Harlan's.

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Mr. Boles' new story begins on a clear and cold winter evening in New England, a timeless sort of night, with new fallen snow softening all signs of progress...

The Sled

by PAUL DARCY BOLES

On a January night, Isiad Meloriot stood in the window of his home on Carvington Drive, in an old New England town, and stared moodily out at the snow. It had snowed during the preceding night and for part of the morning; down this street the snow still lay like white thick velvet, with an icy sparkle about it. It kept pulling him away from the party whose members moved around in the long, gracious room behind him; standing here, a tall man with a brooding look and dark, faintly puzzled eyes, he thought of half-recalled tales of childhood, such as The Snow Queen...the snowflakes moving like great birds, high up; the upper spaces of the dark ringing like a great bell...

At his back he heard snatches of party conversation — not, it had to be admitted, much different in essence than they would always be, he thought. "Of course there's a secret revolution in the heart of America..." "The two-party system may be dead after the next election..." "Put it in municipals, I told him, and forget those wild come-ons..." And I nearly fell over, all the while I thought Charles, Junior, had chicken pox —" "You take the whites of four eggs, and —"

The talk buzzed. And out on the lawn the snow lay brave and mysterious, under a white moon. It was a secret light, but radiant enough to see very well by; all the shapes of bushes, of trees, were clouded and wonderfully concealed — changed, changed wholly by the snow. Isiad, who was in his late forties, remembered how it had been when he was a boy, waking to the realization that the snow had

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fallen in the night. A changed light on the walls of the rooms in the house, everything attaining a special wonder and a certain hush, everything giving off rays of special intelligence, as though from another world....

The shadows of the maples at the rim of the drive, which he had spent an hour shoveling and sweeping this afternoon, lay straight as dark lanes into another country. There was no breath of wind in all the night. From his window he could see, past the peculiar faint reflection of himself and the reflections of the moving, chattering groups of people at his back (as though they lived in a golden cave swinging in the center of the large dark world) all the way down the slope of his side lawn to the heaps of snow tumbled on both flanks of Carvington Drive by the town snowplow; the Drive itself, which had, years before, been widened from a country road into a two-lane cement thoroughfare, seemed to beckon and summon something deep in him, something that had been buried for many years. He had no name for it; it was there, that was all. He placed his empty glass on the windowsill and turned — but could not resist one glance back, over his shoulder, before returning like a good host to his friends.

In that last glance the yearning — yes, it was a yearning — seemed to grow enormously; he felt, perhaps absurdly (assessing the thought even while he recognized its validity) that he might be stifled, might even in some odd and certainly inexplicable way, choke to death unless he could escape into this night, and soon.

Resolutely he put down the foolish thought. He walked across to one of the chattering groups where his wife, Sally, and her friend Myra Butterworth, and the Lambkins, Jed and Frieda, and Tommy Whittle, the old bachelor, stood and talked animatedly, cutting in on one another blithely, keeping several conversational themes moving like invisible oranges juggled with casual ease in the warm, noisy air.

Presently his wife (they had been married twenty years) turned to him, broke off her explanation of how she had been the unfairly chosen recipient of a parking ticket the previous Tuesday in one of the downtown streets, and said in a quiet voice that just reached him, her personal-in-the-middle-of-a-party voice, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Isiad said in the same voice. His wife was still beautiful, he thought; staidly beautiful, perhaps, but with a large silky cornflower beauty that forever warmed him even when he was not fully conscious of it, like a faithful

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and handsome stove. He had no regrets; if he had it all to do over again...yes, it would probably come out the same. It was the tension of the world, in that huge darkness out there, that touched all the lives here in these seemingly safe rooms...the feeling that everything was rushing toward what it seemed fashionable to call polarization, that people in their cells of self, all over the earth, were feeling the same knives of hatred and the sense of dispossession. It was a matter of the self, and all selves—perhaps, turning to a kind of unseen stone, inturning, each with his or her set of panaceas and beliefs — though sometimes the beliefs changed overnight; you had to be fluid in this life now — it was a suffocating feeling, a rope around the neck. "Nothing," he said, smiling reassuringly. "Think I'll take a walk..."

She nodded, and patted his arm; she plunged back into her amusing encounter with one of the traffic policemen of the town, sending a parting look after Isiad, a look compounded of easy benevolence and affection and strength: let it all crumble, the look said in effect; we know what we know, we are still staunch in the center of chaos. We have each other and our friends. But, he thought, perhaps that isn't enough any more; perhaps even the involvements, the civic groups, the progressive groups, are never going to be enough again...and perhaps there are fewer and fewer lasting friendships now, of the kind that are not based on business or any sort of expediency. The children, some with long hair and strange dress, feel it; it is what draws them into groups — communes trying desperately to achieve the spirit of the pioneer, which was naturally a unit and naturally strong and close to the giving earth....

He was in the hall which led to the kitchen; amiably, he brushed past several more clumps of volatile talkers, nodding back and smiling as he moved toward the kitchen. In the kitchen, his oldest friend, Shad Ambrose (they had gone to grade school together; long ago, on a day such as this had been they would have built snow forts all the daylight hours until they were frozen nearly to the marrows and sustained only by a kind of cheer of the heart which the snow gave) was at the sink, getting a pitcher of water; the Meloriot household was as familiar to him as his own; the Meloriots and the Ambroses were great friends without anything ever said about it. Shad was quite fat; he finished filling the pitcher and said, "I wish Sally wouldn't serve those little things — those sausage things. All they do is tempt me, and I'm a pushover. I've thought about joining a health club — I'll keep on

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thinking about it until the thought goes away." He turned to Isiad. "Great night for a bobsled run," he said. His bright blue eyes were almost wistful, for the moment. "Or do they have bobsleds any more? The old kind — pung, they called them. Pungs. Old Man Iverson had the last one I saw — he ran the icehouse and the coal company, such as they were. Where the shopping center is now."

"I haven't seen one for a long time," Isiad said thoughtfully. "Old Man Iverson had a wolfskin rug, too — hair worn about off — he kept it tucked around his knees when he drove."

In the flick of the look between Shad and Isiad lived all the past, all the solid warmth of knowing exactly where you were and where you stood in relation to everyone, it seemed, on earth — to the Chinese and the Japanese, to the French and the East Indians, to the Italians and the Eskimos — all these jolly little figures dressed in more-or-less native costume and shining-faced in school books — and of course, to Old Man Iverson, and Santa Claus, and certainly to God. It was only a look, and then Shad was moving off toward the hall, holding the full pitcher with care and taking small steps. Alone in the shining kitchen (with its dark windows holding glints of white, hints of the huge bright night beyond) Isiad stood for a moment feeling, again, that strange and deep pull of the night on his spirit, even in his physical being. Then he turned and opened the door to the basement, turning on the light just inside the door, shut the door behind him, and went down the steps. At the bottom of the stairs, on the first landing, was a door that led to the walk outside, and in turn around the house to the side lawn and the drive. His old work coat, lined with sheepskin that was growing thin and matted from use through the years, hung on a hook beside the door. Through the slightly snow-puffed panes of the window set in the upper half of this outside door the night beckoned; it seemed almost to have a voice, not a Snow Queen's commanding and regal voice that could turn anyone to ice, but something much more spacious and thoughtful — for a few ticks of time, Isiad stood at the top of this short flight of stairs with his head slightly cocked, listening... at his back the pulse of conversation pounded on in the rooms of his house, a bustle that seemed already distant and essentially unimportant.

That was the moment in which he saw the sled. It was quite a simple sled, and quite large. It was fairly new, and painted a fine utilitarian shade of red, all over. As he went down the steps and

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inspected it (there it was, leaning against the wall beside the outer door and not far from his coat, as though it had always been there) he saw that it was homemade; this was no Flexible Flyer of his youth, but a much older breed: its runners were faintly bright in the strips of iron that had been patiently nailed to the wedges of wood. It looked as though it had been used, and used hard, but could stand up under much more use. He ran the tips of his fingers along the steering slabs. It would work all right, he thought (strangely, he did not ask where it had come from; this did not enter his mind at all), as soon as you got the hang of it. It was made of very strong wood, oak, he'd judge, though you couldn't quite tell with that thick coat of paint on it. The paint had rippled a little while drying; this gave the texture a kind of home-grown beauty. There was no maker's name, he found as he turned it around: the undercoat of paint was as heavy as the upper.

He reached for his coat and shrugged into it, all the while studying the sled. There was a faithfulness about it — a sense of rugged dependability. He felt about it the way he had felt about dogs and horses and nearly all people, when he had been young. He had his coat buttoned up to the chin; above him a burst of laughter came dimly here; he reached for the sled, which, even leaning there, came nearly to his shoulders' height. Then he was opening the outer door and carrying the sled into the night. He felt that he had always had this sled, and even knew a faint wonderment that he had not used it in so long. Certainly it was a perfect night for sledding.

Perfect. The door had shut at his back. He stood half in shadow beside the house. Beneath him, before him, the lawn sloped down to Carvington Drive; the shadows of the maples were clean-lined and possessed of a blackness so rich it was partly blue. Isiad watched the smoke of his breath move a little on the air, felt the warmth of the sheepskin collar touch his chin, and felt the small particles of ice forming there after his warm breath had moistened the wool. On his right a window in the living room threw a rhomboid of yellow light onto the unbroken snow of the lawn (the Meloriots had no close neighbors, and their own children were grown and away), and across this, shadows passed with a kind of airy floating quality, and also as though the shadows held more intensity than those who made them. He recognized the actual profile of Doctor Brooks, but it was closer to him than the actual being of the doctor. He gripped the sled firmly; he should have brought a

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pair of gloves, but after you had held to those wooden steering handles for a time, your hands would warm up sufficiently, he knew. He drew in a deep breath, then took a long run down the lawn, his feet in their low shoes breaking swiftly through the crust of the snow and sending up gouts of disturbed snow behind him...then the moment came, here it was, he had enough speed; he flopped down on the sled and was suddenly flying down the hill toward the Drive.

It was exactly as he had remembered it, but the memory itself had been only a far tracing of the splendor of the experience. Under him the runners made a noise not quite a squeak and not quite a protest; he was heading straight for the Drive, it was rushing at him, and he was so close to the snow he could see it running away beneath him in crystal exaltation; the nearness, the smell of it — vast and moist beneath the ice crusts; the trees whipping by as he sped. They were merely dark shapes which watched with a kind of approval. The moon glinted on the untouched surface around him, and lent a kind of special magnificence to each locked crystal of the snow itself, so that it was also like coasting on diamonds. "A good belly whopper," he thought. He had forgotten about belly whoppers. It was strange that he had. And now he was at the Drive, crashing through a barrier of piled snow left by the day's plowing: for a second he felt that he would be caught in this man-made drift and have to fight his way out; but he was all the way through. His head and shoulders were covered with snow; it was down his back, and his shoes were full of it; these things did not matter, and they were not, truly, uncomfortable. He was still coasting. He pulled hard on the right-hand steering bar, angling the sled to the right; it responded with reluctance, but that only made him feel proud. It was a sled you had to command. It was like the old cars had been, the early automobiles, before power steering or any kind of creature comfort in operation; from this viewpoint, lying flat on the sled, it was as though (once you had made it obey you, once you had mastered it) you yourself flew along, only a few inches above the sleek and slipping surface — as though you had the power to make yourself into a human, low-shooting arrow, while the snowbanks from the plows fled beside you in white and streaming companionship.

Carvington Drive (once Carvington Old Road) goes down to that village by gentle degress, with perhaps twenty large turns, both to east and west, before it reaches the

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village proper. When it was Carvington Old Road, there were only a few farms scattered along it at intervals of half a mile; today there are many subdivisions, evincing varying degrees of prosperity and householder pride. But no one seemed to be out and about tonight; as he flickered and gently bumped and smoothly ran past gaps in the snowbanks, to right and left Isiad could catch glimpses of cleared driveways and lighted homes; cars parked in the driveways; evidences of life and steaming humanity; but there were no cars in the Drive itself. His feet were growing cold, but this too was not unpleasant, only one of the hazards of the sport. Below him the road came to its first wide curve. Here the plows had thrown snow higher on the right-hand side; he steered hard left, and for a moment thought he was going to be stopped, then, almost grazing the sheen-iced glare of the right-hand bank, which seemed to stretch miles up against the moonlight like a cliff, he had escaped the danger. He smiled stiffly — the skin of his face was as cold as a cold peach. He concentrated on the continuing left turn, exerting all his strength to keep his weight and the sled's runners turned that way.

Then, again, the way was clear until the next curve. Now there were trees along it — some of the old trees that had escaped the builders' bulldozers and screaming saws; looking up, head lifted and cold streaming past his ears and mouth and particularly centered in his forehead, he thought he saw the Carvington Oak. Of course this would have been impossible; the Carvington Oak had been cut down at least a dozen years before. Several accidents had happened because of it, people said; it had thrust out into the Drive with great roots hugging deep to the earth, its lower boughs a hazard for cars taking too much of the roadway; odd that he should have thought it still there...it had been very vivid, its winter-stripped boughs rich and brambly, a network of them braving the sky in the clean moonlight...

He looked back. Only for a breath. And there it was, the Carvington Oak — somehow, in spite of its rugged defiant look, cheerful in every one of its enormous boughs, in its broad trunk and the vast roots like the knuckles of grayed giants. It was carved against the sky in an enormous intaglio. Isiad turned his head to the front again; another curve was coming. This one swept to the right. And again the snowbank was taller, but this time, on the left-hand side. Bearing right, nearly gritting his teeth with the effort, he thought until the last

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second that he would make it. Then he struck a sneaking projection of the snowbank on the left, and the sled went spinning and clattering in one direction and he in another. When he got to his knees, then to his feet, the night was very still. There was only a dog crying to the moon a long distance off. The sled looked intact — he strode to it, shoes making a light crunching in the road, and picked it up. With chilled fingers he patted it. It looked fine. He pulled on the steering bars; right; left; back to center.

But his feet were freezing. He looked down the road. There was a swept driveway, and beyond it, the suggestion of a building.

Isiad blinked. The first town library had been here. But hadn't it been torn down years ago — more than twenty — when the new library was put up in the center of town? Of course it had; one could be absolutely certain of that; he had driven past the place this morning, on his way to town with Sally. Yet there was the driveway, the same one that had long ago been obliterated by time and weather and neglect; snow was piled on either flank of it, he saw, as, carrying the sled, he marched on pained feet through the snow to the edge of it; and there was a mailbox. It was painted in what painters of public facilities used to call "blind green" (much favored for park benches) and it said: *Public Library* in plain white, recently stenciled letters. He looked along the driveway. There it was, the mammoth old house that had been converted to a library in the early 1800s, building on the rich store of books collected by Mister Wainwright, ex-lumber baron (who had been a raper of the woods, a stripper of trees, but who in his softer age had reformed and given away possessions right and left, as though the trees he had cut down were haunting him). The Wainwright place, the old library, had turrets raised at peculiar and whimsical angles all over it; balconies galore; it was four stories, and it should have looked like the summer place of Count Dracula, but in reality it was splendid and warming in the night.

And it was lighted on the lower floors. Isiad started up the drive. For a few paces, he expected the old library to melt away before him. But it did not. It stayed just as it had always been in his youth. The sled felt colder in his bare hands. When he had climbed the long flight of porch steps, each swept and ringing under his solidly planted soles, he propped the sled against one of the porch pillars and opened the huge door with its antique, semi-Victorian tracings of floral designs in the glass, its worn

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but patently serviceable brass filigreed knob. He climbed the next short flight of steps, and then he was in the library. Over there at the desk sat Miss Farrington, her yellow-ivory hair drawn up in a knob on the top of her head, her somewhat parrot-beak nose bent down as she pored through files. She looked up. She had died in 1939, but this did not, now, seem accurate knowledge. "Good evening, Isiad," she said. "We close up in fifteen minutes. Please be quiet and don't ask for more than your five books."

"No, ma'am," said Isiad. He made his way to the nearest stacks. They extended high to high ceilings; when you wanted those on the upper shelves, you had to use a double-pronged book lifter, which sometimes brought more books than you expected down on you. The smell of the books, many of which were bound in dark, grainy calf, rose around him; there, close by, rightly being among the M's, was Melville: *Typee, Redburn,* and there — *Moby-Dick.* It had the most frightening and satisfying engraving of any angry whale, rising from the luminous sea's awful depths, he had ever seen. He took it down; it was heavy and wonderfully full of joy and terror in the hands; he opened to the page with the engraving. It was quite as wonderful as he remembered. The whale's flanks were a gloomy off-white, snow in moonlight when a cloud scuds across the moon, and the whale's eye was marvelously intelligent, malevolent, and possessed of godlike patience. But he put it back. He wandered along, in the dusk between the lofty stacks. Here was Mark Twain — he took out *Tom Sawyer,* not *Huckleberry Finn;* Huckleberry was someone you got to know and appreciate when you were older; Tom Sawyer was the first. He read the first page. *"Tom — you, Tom!" No answer...*

Almost tenderly, he put it back. But it was real in his hand, real in the shelf; the Harper's illustrated edition, heavy and full of the spark and shine of all story-telling truth.

He wandered along, to another lane between stacks. He found Toby Tyler and the Circus, and Mr. Stubb's Brother, and Robin Hood, with the N.C. Wyeth illustrations. For a moment he thought of climbing the rear stairs to another floor, where the fairly secret privy stock of books guarded by Miss Farrington could be winkled out of their places by slightly forcing a door which she thought impregnable — D. H. Lawrence was there, and the godless Robert Ingersoll, and the first works of the controversial Mr. Eugene O'Neill... Isiad did not climb the stairs.

He said good-night to Miss

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Farrington. His feet were quite warm now, if wet. "No books?" asked Miss Farrington, rather haughtily. "What's got into you?"

"I better bring back a few, first," said Isiad.

Out on the porch again, looking toward the Drive, he was quite swift about picking up the sled, and he was running when he got to the Drive itself. He slammed himself down full-length on the sled with the heavy grace of an old campaigner in these matters. Again the wind whistled past his ears, the white night streamed past, the snowbanks towered; he made the next turn with ease, and then slowed up, doing his shoes great damage and dragging his toes in the snow as a pirate ship uses a drogue to slow its progress when in interesting waters. He had found another driveway cleared of snow. This time he was confident, knowing precisely where he was going.

Mister Tabb, the maker of violins — "Nothing as good as a Strad, my boy, but I might try for a Cremona —" had his workshop at the back of his house; the door from outside was unlatched. Surrounded by half a hundred instruments in various stages of repair and building-progress, Mister Tabb looked up over the slippage of his spectacles (they were always very dusty with fine-grained sawdust; the place smelled wonderfully of seasoned wood and the glue that bubbled in a dark pot on the stove) and said, "Get close to the fire, you'll get the pneumonia."

Isiad obeyed. Mister Tabb was fitting a slender slice of wood, dark as a black cherry in color, in beside another slice; his fingers appeared far too cumbersome for the work, but they operated like delicate calipers. "Time," he said as he worked. "Everybody thinks it's maybe a river, or a spiral. They don't think it all goes on at once, all times together; so nothing gets lost, you see." Then he changed the subject, though it didn't seem abruptly. "Don't stay out too late tonight — there'll be other nights."

Then: "Hold this in the pliers, steady your wrist on the bench — ach, you got your shirt a little dirty —"

"It'll wash," said Isiad.

He held another wood strip for Mister Tabb, until Mister Tabb had shaved off a minuscular portion of it. Then he said good-night, as he had to Miss Farrington. Mister Tabb said casually, eyes now hidden because his shock of iron-gray hair was a waterfall as he stooped and worked, "Come soon again."

In the road, on the Drive, Isiad hurled himself down on the sled again and wiggled his toes to try

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to keep some of the heat in. When he came to the Carvington Inn, it was lighted, as he'd known it would be; subtly lighted, not like the great old library; ropes and strings of light were coming under its half-drawn blinds. When he entered, the smell of sawdust on the floor, the cedar smell that seemed always to have hung around the air, and the eyes of the deer once shot by the first owner of the place — buttonlike gentle eyes — were also as they had always been. The bartender, Gus Maclevy, looked up under bushy black eyebrows — Gus was a great admirer of Jack Dempsey, and was told that he resembled him, except for the weight — and stopped talking to Old Man Iverson for a moment.

"One cider," he said. "One good cider, and then —"

"One's all I want," said Isiad.

Isiad got up on the stool beside Old Man Iverson. He had left the sled beside the fine bobsled of Old Man Iverson, out in the moony driveway. He had noted that the frayed and decrepit wolfskin rug lay on the driving seat of the pung. Now, blowing on his hands, he watched with appreciation while Gus drew a cold amber glass of cider from the barrel, and he took it and drank with even more appreciation. "Not quite hard, it's right on the edge, but kicksome," said Gus.. "It's on the house tonight, seeing's I ain't had the pleasure of your company lately."

Old Man Iverson said, "You going all the way to middle of town?"

"No," said Isiad. "Just this far."

"Sleddin'?"

"Eeyah," said Isiad.

"Give you a lift home," volunteered Old Man Iverson. "I'm goin' out that way. Deliver a load of winter apples to Mrs. Ketcham."

"I thank you," said Isiad.

He drank the rest of the cider, to the lambent last drop, while in a low voice Gus talked on to Old Man Iverson; it wasn't until they both were ready to go that Gus said to Isiad, "Now you remember the way, come back. Bring Shad with you — that's a real comical boy."

"Check your coal supply," Old Man Iverson counseled Gus as they left. "I got some real good hard-egg stuff in, better'n that slack I was ashamed to give away around Christmas."

He drew the door shut. "Real clear night," he said, surveying the moon and the icy stars. "Finer'n frog hair."

Isiad threw the sled in the back of the pung. The horse, Nell, was reluctant to start after the blanket had been stripped off her back and withers; Old Man Iverson clucked to her in the tongue he used to horses, and finally she shambled

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ahead, with a lot of harness and harness-buckle noise, and a *sloof* of sound as the runners broke loose from the ice.

But when they were out on Carvington Drive in the road itself, Nell settled down to a smart trot until the going got really uphill, at which time she simply put herself into it and pulled. The bells on the pung made a gentle racket as they advanced. "Sounds like tree toads," observed Old Man Iverson at one point. "Always makes me think of spring in the middle of winter."

He pushed the wolfskin robe over. "Here, you need it worse'n I do."

Then there were the hoofs of Nell, and the bells, and finally some sleep. But Isiad woke when Old Man Iverson shook his shoulder. With no special emphasis, he said, "You get out here. Don't forget your sled: And remember about time. It don't go in circles; it don't live in planes; it's all of it always there. You get to feeling like you want to ask a million questions, don't. You'll just live, and die, and learn — about in that sequence. You got a little edge on the learnin' part, in advance — kind of an experiment they're makin', I'd judge — but don't noise it around much. Just to Shad, for right now. Keep your tail up."

Isiad thanked him for the ride and stood in the road and watched, holding the sled, while the bobsled, or pung in the old word-sense, went away slowly into the brilliant night. One moment it was still a small, slightly noisy shadow in the roadway; then it was gone.

Down the lawn toward Carvington Drive ran the tracks which Isiad and the sled had made as he first belly-whopped; as he climbed the lawn's slope, the windows of the house sending out light ahead, the cars of his guests still in the driveway of the house, he saw, too, his own footprints — and where they had stopped as he ran, and where the twin clean tracks of the sled runners began as he had started out. He worked his way into the shadow of the house; the sled felt fairly heavy now, but it was in one piece, sturdy and usable, he thought, for many times to come.

He let himself in at the lower basement door and stripped off his soaked coat. His shoes were also soaked. And as he hung up the coat, he had an irksome feeling of thinking that he had already propped the sled against the wall; for there it was; but he couldn't remember doing it; he couldn't remember lifting it from the floor. Then he looked down, and there was his sled; on the floor. And there was another sled, just like it, propped against the wall. Home-made, as his was, and maybe even a

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little heavier in construction — as it would have to be, of course, to bear such a weight as Shad's.

He propped his own sled beside it, and with some affection, rubbed off a few water drops from the serviceable red paint with the heel of a hand. Then he climbed the stairs to the kitchen.

He got quite a little chatter about having been out so long, and Sally expressed some consternation over the point that he might take cold, but Doctor Brooks thought he looked all right for the experience "The air's still good out here," said the doctor. "Probably be so, for a year or so, until they build some more poison-giving efficient factories out this way. Oh, we'll fight 'em all we can; something that calls itself *reason* will win in the end. You can't stop time, you can't stop —" He grunted. "Progress." Then he looked hard at Isiad. "Listen, you rotten host — you don't look as if you believe me."

Isiad smiled, and winked at Shad Ambrose — who was hovering over more things to eat. This was an old signal they they ought to get together and talk, that one or the other had an idea, or a plan.

Much later, when all the guests had gone, and there was that yawning sated feeling the host and hostess enjoy after a genial party, Sally, that fine and blooming woman — no, he wouldn't have done anything differently in his life if he'd had the chance, thought Isiad — came up behind him as he stood at the window, looking out at the still brilliant and secret night. He could feel her there, hear her breathing, and then she laid a hand on his shoulder. "Have a good time?"

"Great," said Isiad Meloriot. "Look, Shad and I are going — bowling, tomorrow night."

"Fine. Like to take me along, and Polly?" Polly was Shad's wife.

"Maybe we'll take you — bowling, later in the year," said Isiad.

"I'm satisfied, one way or the other...what are you smiling at?"

"Just that it's starting to snow again," said Isiad.

"What's so good about that?"

He turned lazily, full of life and a kind of massive trust.

"Just that it's starting to snow."

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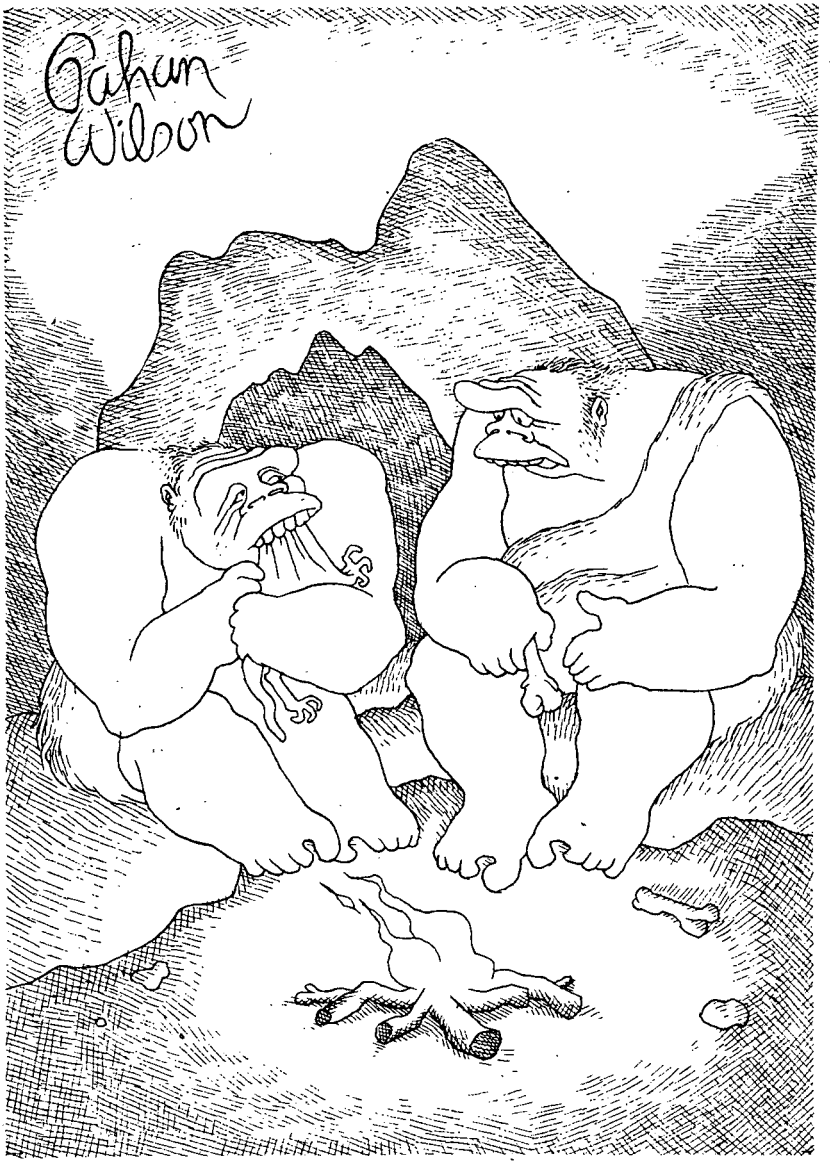

"Sorry I'm not making myself clearer, but it's hard to express yourself in a language as crude and primitive as ours."

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The Centauri device is a mysterious and powerful alien weapon that everyone wants except our hero, Captain John Truck. Trouble is, Truck seems to be the only person who can lay his hands on the thing. The story, says Mr. Harrison, "was written from an impulse partly satirical and partly sentimental." Mr. Harrison's most recent novel is THE PASTEL CITY (Doubleday).

The Centauri Device

by M. JOHN HARRISON

It was St. Crispin's Eve on Sad Al Bari IV when Captain John Truck, impelled by sentiment, decided to visit The Spacer's Rave, on the corner of Proton Alley and Circuit.

"Don't accept any cargo," he told his bosun as he prepared to leave *My Ella Speed,* "for at least two weeks. Especially don't accept any vegetable seeds. I will never haul turnips again, any shape or form."

"What's a turnip?" asked the bosun, who was a Chromian dwarf called Fix. He was good with an ax, but backward.

"A turnip is what your head is," explained John Truck smugly. "Children wear them for the same reason you have filed your teeth. Don't forget, no vegetable seeds."

And with a jaunty wave he quit the ship.

He reached the Alley by way of Bread Street and East Thing, a damp, chilly wind hunched and his head bent as if he were bored with it all (which he was), his snakeskin combat jacket and big leather hat straight out of the questionable past of the Galaxy.

Spaceport hustlers and buskers — their peculiar instruments glimmering in the dim green street light — solicited him, but he ignored them. He had seen them before, shivering in the night winds of a hundred planets, waiting out their lives in the bleak hinterlands of a thousand ports. They would go home later to the same greasy doorways and street benches and barren flops, or ride the *pneumatique* systems until dawn: threadbare losers for whom he could find no compassion because they so resembled himself. The aimlessness in them called for a response from him, a resonance he had little enough strength to deny.

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This isn't to say they made him unhappy; he was just hollow, nothing had ever filled him up.

Since his demob from the fleet (a year after all the hysteria of the Canes Venatici incident had come to nothing), he had worked all over the sky, traveling a slow Archimedean spiral in three dimensions, tracking in from Venatici through the Crow and the Heavy Stars. He had driven half-tracks on Gloam and Parrot, built roads on Jacqueline Kennedy Terminal; he had sung revolutionary songs and pushed meta-amphetamines to the all-night workers on Morpheus. After five years, he had ended up on old Earth, where everybody ends, guarding heavy plant machinery for the Israeli World Government.

Five thousand for every Arab he shot — not an awful lot for dirty work. He had found himself wetting his trousers every time somebody fired a gun (in fact, that had worn off after a time, but he still told it that way, against himself, with a lot of gestures and funny voices) and tapping a streak of personal violence he would rather have left alone.

Had he not saved his bounty money and bought with it *My Ella Speed* (then called *Liberal Power*, something which caused him to scratch his head), his seven-year trip from demob day to Sad Al Bari IV might easily have ended at the periphery of the port, accomplished by means of his horny thumb, a cheap musical instrument, and his hat on the pavement wrong way up to receive bread. Instead of on his head where it belonged. Even the purchase of the boat had, at the time, assumed the air of a fortunate accident: John Truck was a loser, and losers survive on luck.

It was his personal disaster that he never learned to resist the flow of events; he never learned to make steerage way.

Proton Alley is as cold as all the other streets; any warmth you think you might find there always turns out to be an illusory side-product of the color of the neon lights. But John Truck basked in its familiarity, which is perhaps an acceptable substitute on St. Crispin's Eve.

Inside The Spacer's Rave, Tiny Skeffern, the Galaxy's last great musician, was blowing his brains out through his instrument like the contents of a rare egg.

John Truck knew him of old. He stood five foot three and slightly built in the Rave's confusion of spots and strobes and kaleidomats, tapping his right foot. His hair was sparse, curly and blond — at twenty-two years, he already had a bald patch. When he wasn't playing, he goofed around as if he had springs; when he was, he

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stayed in one place for minutes on end, giving the ladies a reserved but cheeky smile. He was an enthusiastic loser, and he nodded when Truck came in.

He played a four-hundred-year-old Fender Stratocaster with the switchgear jammed so that all the pickups operated at once through a stack of Luthos amps — each one with a guaranteed half-kilowatt output — and a battery of Hydrogen Line twenty-inch speakers. He had a loose-limbed Denebian queen, all pink flares and slashed sleeves, on bass; his drummer was a local man. His sound was long-line and hairy, slow and grinding, full of inexplicable little runs and complications. He stalked the Denebian bass through the harmonies; he made sounds like breaking glass and exploding quasars.

"I'm a highway child," he sang, "so don't deny my name."

John Truck bought himself a knickerbocker glory topped with little crystals of tetrahydrocannabinol and had a look at the audience. They were mostly musicians from other bands, but there was a sprinkling of other spacers who, like John Truck, understood that music had died out in the year 2,000 and that the new music was the Old Music. Only the winners escape, Truck thought, as the old Strat wailed (taking fours with a wholly imaginary wind which nevertheless sent tremors of intent through his calves and thighs: the port wind, the compass wind). The rest of us get carried by the music. Why not?

There was only one woman in The Spacer's Rave that night. Her name was Angina Seng, and she was looking for John Truck. He wasn't to know it; he could only see her back. Her hair was long and coppery; she held herself with a certain dramatic tension. Her bottom looked nice. So while Tiny Skeffern screwed it out of his glossy antique for the discontented, the disconnected, and the rudderless, John Truck fell precipitately in and out of love with her. It was an impartial, on-off passion, for every spaceport lady seen from behind in a crowd.

In a hiatus between sets, Tiny brought the Fender over.

"Hello, Truck."

He bobbed about for a moment, grinning sentimentally, and sat down.

"Tiny. You play dirtier and dirtier. Who's the girl?"

Tiny huffed, wiped his sleeve over the guitar's immaculate finish. He shrugged. Even when the Strat wasn't plugged in, the stubby, clubbed fingers of his left hand ran up and down the frets as if they were looking for a way out of the

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"Oh, thanks. She's not regular. I've been here three bloody weeks."

He helped himself to some of Truck's unfinished treat.

"If you want to lift out of here," offered Truck.

"You've still got *Ella Speed.* What a name. I never could get over that."

He chuckled.

"I'll be around when you finish this gig," Truck told him. "Or you could go find her at the dock. Fix, the bosun, is aboard, I hope."

Tiny got up. He did a little energetic shuffle, nodded, and went back to his band. He and Truck hadn't met since his teen-age prodigy days, when he was playing the circuits on Gloam. That had been quite a lot of laughs, Truck recalled. He smiled to himself and worked some THC grit from between two of his teeth with his tongue. And he laughed out loud when Tiny leaned down from the cramped Rave stage and whispered something to the girl with the coppery hair.

He didn't understand how she could be so pleased to see him. How could he? He only knew that spaceport women sometimes have metaphysical appetites hard to describe, riding on the backs of their more common hungers. They represent a different function of space, a significance of loneliness lost on their male counterparts. They are the true aliens. So he regarded her with wariness.

"Mr. Truck, I have been searching the port for you."

"Go on," said Truck. "You say that to all the spacers. It's captain, actually. Is there something I can do for you."

She told him her name. She was a big, bony, sensual girl, but her face was pinched a little around the mouth and eyes. It wasn't simply the mark of a port lady — although they too are tense and contained as if struggling perpetually to keep their substance from evaporating off into the void. Her clothes glittered like an armored fish, dissolving irregularly as the kaleidomat light hit critical frequencies.

"Captain Truck, how would you like a job?"

He shook his head.

"I am on planet leave. Come back in two weeks. I shall be stoned on Sad Al Bari here for two weeks."

He demonstrated by waving his hands around.

"It isn't a haulage job, Captain. You won't need to fly."

"They're the only kind I take. I've got a Chromian bosun to support. Really, you should find someone else." He thought for a moment. "Besides which," he said "*you* aren't hiring me."

She put her elbows on the table, toyed with his knickerbocker glory, then clasped her hands.

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"It's true. But my sponsor will pay better for a few weeks than any comparable hauling job, and you didn't make much on that last seed run."

"Oh, you," he said. "You've been talking to somebody. They were right, but I don't need the money that badly. In two weeks, yes."

She wasn't fooling him.

"Captain Truck," she said, "what if I told you this was a chance to help the people of the Galaxy?"

"I would say that you have picked a loser. If it's politics, double screw it." He beamed at her. "I'm not very political," he explained.

She got up without another word.

"You're not a port lady at all," he called after her as she threaded her way through the tables to the door. But he wasn't really talking to her.

The evening went on; The Spacer's Rave got packed out. "If I had to do it all over," sang Tiny Skeffern, "I'd do it all over you —" but Truck had lost interest. About an hour after Angina Seng had gone, he went off to look for somewhere quiet. She had soured it for him. He could not imagine who might want him so badly for himself and not *My Ella Speed.*

As he went out the door, Tiny and his drummer were exchanging strokes, playing with psychopathic detachment and gentleness.

Outside, the same old wind. East Thing was a street without apparent function, a barrack thoroughfare for the smart privates of the great commercial army — warehouses and the occasional front office. Packed by day with clerks and chandlers, it was a desert of vapor lamps by night; nobody walked it then except to get to The Spacer's Rave, and most of them were there already.

Coming abreast of a deep doorway in the high numbers, Truck noticed nothing, but a sneaky foot whipped out of it nonetheless and tangled up his long legs. He fell on the floor as somebody sniggered from inside.

It wasn't that he didn't believe in violence. He regained his feet in time to balk a straight arm with big iridium knuckles on the end and then executed a snappy pull-on body check. He was winding up the boot preparatory to putting it in when somebody hit him in the kidneys with what felt like a brick. He groaned. He staggered forward and tripped over his wheezing victim.

He squirmed around trying to get a look at who was hitting him so hard, pulled his head in rapidly and rolled on to the lee side of the knuckle man as the brick caught

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him in the chest. It was, in fact, a shoe — a lace-up shoe with a weighted toecap, which surprised him so much that he forgot to keep his head moving. All he could do after a little more of that was curl up into a ball and wrap his arms round his face while he thought about it.

The knuckle man recovered enough to apply a reversed-arm lever, haul Truck upright and begin half walking, half dragging him (dimly, he recognized the technique from somewhere else, but couldn't pin it down) toward a battered black g.e.v. parked across the street. From Truck's position it looked the size of a fleet battleship, but even with both of them working at it they had a job trying to fold him up enough to get him inside.

While they were sorting it out, a late-model Lewis/Phoenix with all eight headlamps on main beam hurled out of Bread Street and drifted to a stop endwise across East Thing.

Tap, tap, tap, went some heels.

"Leave him alone," said Angina Seng, her voice bright and tight. She was supporting an ugly Chambers reaction pistol with both hands. A dark cloak was thrown over her indoor clothes.

Silence.

With sulky looks, they left him alone. Plucky Angina watched them rat off down the street, heading for the dock. They were dressed almost like spacers.

"Well, Captain Truck," she said, as she helped him into her vehicle, "you would think, wouldn't you, that those sort of people would at least leave their own kind alone."

Truck said nothing. One of his lower canines was giving him trouble; between tentative explorations of his mouth he was listening to the wind.

"Where have you brought me?" he asked suspiciously. He was still inspecting the damage.

She smiled encouragingly at him from across the lift car. *Fifth Floor,* chimed the little elliptical speaker set into the wall: *Fifth Floor.*

"I thought you might like to speak to my sponsor after what happened," she told him. "Once you know all the facts, you might change your mind about the job." It was a bald implication.

"Facts," he chuckled. "Sponsor. Ho ho."

Don't handle the goods, lady.

"How did you get this way, Captain Truck?" she asked suddenly. "How can you get so uncaring about the universe?"

Stuff you. I was born this way, I think.

"I don't know," he said.

Wagging her tail and already anticipating the plaudits of the

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shepherd, she sheep-dogged him out of the lift and into a pale-blue reception area. There, she vanished behind an unmarked door, leaving him stranded in a landscape of dove-grey carpets like fine soft crops of cellar mold, retrieval systems disguised as useful pieces of furniture, and fashionable, comfortable chairs. He never saw her again.

All the dispossessed and wayward have a fear of frontages. He discussed going back to The Spacer's Rave there and then, but he knew it was probably too late for that: gravitational tides had thrown him up here, and for the moment he was marooned. He leered at a receptionist (who sat behind the keyboard of her input terminal as long-legged and unapproachable — by losers — as an ice princess). She smiled back politely. He took off his hat and scratched his head.

"You may go in now, Captain Truck," she said.

So far, nobody had offered any options. Suddenly remembering Angina Seng's big Chambers pistol, he wondered how much of her gravitational attraction it represented. What was really keeping him here.

"I can see *you're* wearing a girdle," he said to the receptionist. "As a matter of interest, where am I?"

Her smile curdled. "The Israeli consulate," she said, "and I don't think you ought to go around saying things like that to people."

But he was already on his way through the unmarked door, shouting, "You can just entirely forget about it, Miss Seng." She wasn't there, of course. "Oh, shit." He slammed the door behind him.

"That was a pitiful exhibition, Captain Truck. Please sit down."

General Alice Gaw, postmenopausal but hardly decayed at all, a lady with the density of a collapsed star, sat with her right leg thrown over the arm of her plush chair, her short-skirted Women's Army uniform awry and revealing great expanses of powerful thigh. She had varicose veins.

Truck knew her by repute; her eyepatch was a Galactic curiosity. Her voice was loud and brassy; her hands were thick and square.

"Whatever it is," he said, "no. I had enough of this in the fleet." Then, cunningly: "You don't look like a member of the Chosen Race, General —"

He sniggered insinuatingly. She adjusted her eyepatch and sighed. Her bleached-out hair was cut off straight all the way round at ear level; her nose had been broken during a police action on Weber II.

"Truck, I am simply an executive of the World Government, doing a job. It is pointless to bait me. I don't like you either,

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sonny, but I'm keeping quiet about it."

She stared at him from an eye the color of concrete.

"You own half a world, General. The other half you neither govern nor own. To the Galaxy, you have no right whatever. That lays you open."

"We govern the *civilized* world. We police the civilized colonies. Without that security, you might have less freedom to speak. Would you chop logic with a UASR representative sitting in my place?"

Truck shrugged. Events would carry him: it was only left to him to discover in which direction. Abruptly, he recalled the Negev, the hot boredom broken only by brief, violent engagements with infiltrators from the Union of Arab Socialist Republics — the dull concussion of a Chambers shell, the dreadful anger that welled up when he realized he had been shot at.

"Get on with it," he said. "Have you got anything good to smoke — oh, well."

"You may have to pay a little more attention than that, laddie."

She swung her leg, tapped the table. Truck locked his hands in his lap and played absently with them. It looked as if it might be a long session.

"We don't know very much," began General Gaw, "about the old inhabitants of the Centauri system: they were the first of the so-called 'civilized' races to intercept the wave front of human expansion; they were wiped out as a coherent group two centuries ago. That was the 'Centauri Genocide.' Shut up, Truck. You don't understand enough about anything for your opinion to mean much.

"It was a traumatic business for humanity, and by the time the guilt feelings had subsided, the Centauri survivors had bolted off like rats and scattered themselves over the newly colonized planets. They were absorbed fairly quickly — no drive, you see; they lacked racial strength.

"They were enough like us to suggest common ancestry; they weren't native to the Centauri system, although nobody ever discovered traces of them anywhere else; hysterics of the time went as far as to suggest that they had originated on Earth during some earlier period of stellar colonization. Which is balls, don't forget.

"One decent piece of thinking came out of all the tripe. Marsden's hypothesis of Niche Competition described the Galaxy as an ecological complex in which separate space-going races replaced the separate species of a planetary ecosphere. The competition between species whose demands on the environment are identical is inevitable, natural, and harsh.

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"Yes, I do believe it, as a matter of fact. Never mind that. Keep your grubby little fingers out of my head.

"Now. The peculiar thing about that war is that the Centaurans gave up. For fifteen years they stood us off, stalemate; then, quite suddenly, they stopped intercepting the MIEVs and atmospheric intruders. Within three days, Centauri VII was rubbished. They did a good job of that sort of thing then. But listen to this, Truck: we had an on-planet intelligence network down there — it's in the records; reports came through right up until the Centaurans chucked it in. So why did they commit suicide, laddie, when they'd just concluded R&D on a weapon they fully expected to finish the whole shooting match with in their favor?

"You think about that while we talk about you.

"You were born in Parrot. Your mother was a spaceport whore, one of the Weber II refugees. She couldn't even speak the local dialect. As a displaced person, she was subject to resettlement at the convenience of the local government. I'm not asking you any of this, I'm telling you — because I know more about you than you know about yourself.

"Spaceport Annie Truck was shipped to the Heavy Stars when you were six or so months old. She left you behind. I bleed for you, duckie, I really do. But what's more important about Annie is this: she was a bull-blooded Centauran. As far as we can decide, she was the last true Centauran to exist in the Galaxy. That makes you a half-breed, Truck. Finally, on this score — for some reason, she had the primogeniture. If you'd ever read a book, you might have recognized your own bone structure as predominantly Centauran. Your father had weak genes, whoever he was.

"You won't find it so amusing in a minute, chummie.

"Let's go back to the Centauran war. Have it your own way, genocide, it makes no difference to me. That weapon existed, you know. Enough was known about it then to worry Earth. But we have our own reasons now.

"We found it, Truck; we found it in a bunker cut three miles into the crust of Centauri VII. We've been looking for you ever since. We found it, but we don't know how to work it. We can't even get very close to it: it appears to be half sentient. It resents the intrusion.

"We need your genes, Truck. They gave up and left Centauri without using the weapon all right; but they built its operating code into the genes of their unborn brats because they wanted to be able to sneak back to it, like dogs to sick, later. It won't go off without a

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Centauran, laddie. Spaceport Annie died fifteen years ago, and you're the only one we've got."

Truck mulled it over a little. He felt a wry sympathy for the port lady from Weber II. It was easy to see his own birth as a momentary lapse, a miscalculation. But again, had Annie Truck answered some unconscious urge on Parrot? In dividing, to produce another vector, a small image of herself? — as if by that multiplication of possibilities, the long uncomprehending migration might be expedited; something lost by her might be gained by him.

All this in the silence that followed General Gaw's monologue while her one good eye impaled him and wouldn't let go. Eventually he got out of his chair and stood looking down at her.

"How much good will your bomb do us when you drop it?" he asked. He wasn't sure on whose behalf he was asking, who needed to know. "Who will you drop it on, to achieve anything at all?"

When she said, "Leave that out, Truck, you and I know it's rubbish," he turned his back on her. She went on: "We blew two UASR agents in the team that uncovered the Centauri Device. There was a third, but we didn't discover that until he'd bolted. That's what it's about, duckie. It always is."

Indistinctly, because he was thinking about something else: "Then get someone else to prime the thing, General."

He reached the door, went as far as touching the handle, then faced her again. She was still lounging, undisturbed and negligent, her thighs powerful and ugly, her eye bright and compelling.

"That Shanghai attempt," he said, "was it to bolster my confidence in you and Miss Seng? A second string? Don't do it again. The only people who wear lace-ups are fleet police. It only makes you look silly, you see. No spacer would be seen dead in shoes."

She laughed, breezy and ferocious.

"I told the stupid bitch it wouldn't work. There's one more thing, Truck. We need you, we expected to pay for you — but there won't be any offers now.

"You've got yourself into my bad books, I don't mind telling you that. I'm giving you twenty-four hours to consider it; then I'll have you pulled in: trading in stolen fleet medical supplies will be the charge.

"I'll be here if you should decide to behave yourself. By-bye, laddie."

Truck closed the door quietly after him.

He went back to The Spacer's Rave. Paradoxically, he felt as if he had suddenly gained a dependent.

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Why should Annie Truck be on *his* conscience? It was a peculiar reversal.

Tiny Skeffern was winding up his gig in a desultory fashion; bass, drums and most of the audience had packed up and gone home, but a cadaverous ectomorphic spacer was sitting at the console of the Rave's H-Line synthesizer, making flutelike, attic noises while Tiny picked reflectively at the high notes. Only the stoned and persistent remained to listen, wondering how they might find somewhere to go, something to do, at four thirty, St. Crispin's day morning, on Sad Al Bari IV.

By the time the last of them had lurched out into the street, dirty brown light was filtering between the grim hinterland buildings, and the vapor lamps were wan. An occasional chandler, bleary and reluctant with sleep, crept past the door of the Rave on his way to another day. Tiny turned it all off and gently laid the Fender in its hard-shell case. He slapped the shoulder of the guy on the synthesizer, yawned, did a weary little shuffle. "Oh, man."

There is a kind of cold particular to the dawn. All nightside losers know and revere it for its healing stimulant properties. Shivering and grinning at one another, Truck and Tiny hunched off toward the port and Truck's breakfast boat. The compass wind blew; it lay in wait for them at intersections, came whistling round the corners of the warehouses to meet them.

"Hey, look," said Tiny, "it's an Opener."

Waddling down Bread Street toward them in the morning chill was an enormous, splay-footed, wobbling man wearing a big red cloak. His head was bald and round, his features streamlined into his facial tissue so that they were mere suggestions of a mouth, a nose, a chin. His eyes were swaddled deep and tight in flaps and swathes of flesh. His cloak was open at the front.

He was an Opener all right — one of that curious sect whose members believe that honesty of the bodily function is the sole valid praise of God (the existence of whom they freely and frequently aver), that function being an analogue of the motions of the psyche. When the wind peeled back the cloak, he was naked. His body was shaved as hairless as his head, and let into his thorax, stomach and belly were the thick plastic windows the Openers have surgically inserted to show off their internal processes. They were surrounded by thick calloused lips of flesh, and nothing very pleasant was going on behind them.

He had eaten a fairly light

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He stared as he passed them. His eyes were black and secretive. He moved his indeterminate lips into a smile. Suddenly, a short, thick arm whipped from under his cloak (as if the action were quite divorced from him; his smile remained). His meaty hand clutched John Truck's right bicep.

"Here," said Truck. "Get off."

"Good morning, Captain Truck," said the Opener. "I am Dr. Grishkin. The Lord is kind."

"What?"

Truck, gazing through the windows on Dr. Grishkin's soul, recalled that he hadn't eaten for some time. The Opener still had hold of his arm. His stomach rumbled.

"I have just this moment come from your ship. Your bosun told me you were unavailable."

"That's right," mumbled Truck, "not available. I am on planet leave. Sorry."

Dr. Grishkin nodded; he looked saddened. With his free hand, he spread his cloak wide. He resembled an alien aquarium. Truck began to feel ill.

"Captain, I open myself to you. I appeal to you. Although I can see by your outfit you are not one of my scattered brothers, I know from here —" he touched one of his windows "— that you are a man of principle. Captain, I beg for the help you can give me."

Truck shuddered. Dr. Grishkin's enigmatic eyes held his, unwavering. The grip on his arm was tight. He experienced an overpowering sensation of *deja vu.* Over Grishkin's shoulder, he could see right along Bread Street, which was empty and indifferent. Having got him into this, it wasn't going to get him out. Screw all streets, he thought.

"Captain," whispered the Opener, "on Alpha Centauri, I saw the living entrail of God. I heard his voice." He shrugged. "Why I was chosen, I cannot tell; but in my secular capacity, it was given to me to discover the Ark of the Covenant. I am an archeologist, Captain, a researcher of old and forgotten truths." His voice rose. "Captain, help me to recover this wonderful thing for the sheep of the Universe —

"You only are blessed with the key."

His fingers were a clump of pale, raw sausages (chopped meat, forced into the internal membranes of a pig); their touch was becoming unbearable. John Truck squirmed and tore his arm free. Liquids slopped behind Dr. Grishkin's windows — peristalsis occured.

"Grishkin," said Truck, "you and the general can both piss off. I won't have it. Just go to hell." And he walked away, leaving Tiny Skeffern and the Opener staring

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after him. Tiny was puzzled, but there was a certain satisfaction in the Grishkin's piggy eyes.

Tiny caught up, swinging the Fender case. "I think I am going to be sick," he chuckled. "How can he live with his own breakfast like that?"

"Tiny," said Truck, "something queer has been going on, and I hope that's the last of it."

But it wasn't.

When they got back to *My Ella Speed,* they found the loading ramp extended from the open cargo bay like the tongue of an immense mechanical mouth. Fix, the Chromian bosun, was lying huddled up on it. He was dead.

His lips peeled back from those unpleasant filed teeth, he was curled fetally round a massive abdominal wound — as if his final horrified act had been an attempt to contain the several pints of dark fluid congealing on the diamond tread of the ramp. His eyes were narrowed; his fingers were clenched in a brutal knot. Most of the damage was at the exit point of the shell.

Truck (on his knees with his hands in the bosun's blood and his mind on the packed corpse-boats orbiting Cor Caroli in Canes Venatici) heaved and retched, but he had nothing to bring up. He wiped himself on Fix's yellow jerkin, coughing dismally. ("A turnip," he explained, "is what your head is. Don't forget, no vegetable seeds.") Since their government is semifeudal, the Chromians acquire a deep and early familiarity with death; but, oh, you poor sod, he thought. You poor sod. He got up.

"That bastard. 'The Lord is kind.' I'll kill him. What did Fix ever do to him?"

Little Tiny Skeffern — trapped like a circuit in clear plastic by this death, unforseen, and of no one he had ever known — shrugged uncomfortably. He shook his head. "If he wanted something from you, he wouldn't do that," he pointed out. "And where would an Opener hide a gun from us?"

Reluctantly: "I will get someone anyway." Truck, hurt and bitter, gazed along the length of his boat, parked on her side to facilitate loading, toward the command bridge. "Do you think —?"

My Ella Speed, a light-haulage vehicle of the Transit class: three "Dynaflow" converters outputting an estimated twenty gigaton hours for every half ton of fuel consumed; her small cramped hold had carried everything from pure nitromethane for the drag barons of Anywhere to five thousand live ferrets modified for the curious atmosphere on Titus-Bode — now it was empty

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and hollow, and it amplified the scrape of John Truck's bootsoles as he and Tiny sneaked through it on their way to the bridge, breathing through their mouths. She was a sweet and dirty ship.

In the engine room, instrumentation flickered and the display board said *Power Down* in colored lights. Truck put his shoulder against the command bridge hatch and shoved.

I am always opening and closing doors, he thought.

On the other side of this one, at his ease in Truck's command chair, nicely tailored in a light-grey military suit, sat Colonel Gadaffi Ben Barka, People's Army of Morocco, UASR. He was small and slim, his black mustache was clipped thin, his hair was shaved to within an inch of its life. One nut-brown hand rested on his knee; the other was curled round the butt of a slightly effeminate 2mm "handbag" Chambers which had lately blown a gap in Fix the bosun's insides.

"Come in and take a seat, Captain," he advised, his voice quiet and precise.

Truck, thwarted in his desire, which was to damage something living, moved a bit further into the cabin, his hands hooked at his sides.

"People are saying that to me a lot lately. You shot my bosun. I am steadily losing my patience about guns and off-duty politicos."

Colonel Ben Barka's soft brown eyes hooded themselves for a heartbeat. He seemed to be studying his pistol. He had lately returned from an exciting trip, and something he had seen had worried him a little.

"I am sorry about that, Captain. Please accept my apologies."

Truck strangled him, twice. He kicked him in all the soft places he could imagine, with spiked boots. He injected him with a mutated syphilis virus.

"You try telling him that. I want more than that."

Ben Barka smiled. He got out of the pilot's seat and backed away from it. He made a small gesture with the Chambers.

"Please to take your seat, Captain. Ask your comrade to do likewise, slowly and without disturbance. Good. Let me put my case to you, in a spirit of frankness and candor.

"The peoples of the UASR have gained intelligence of a projected violation of their sovereignty, involving a subtle device built by the decadent aliens of Centauri VII in an attempt to halt their engulfment in 2208AD by the equally disgusting expansionists of the so-called 'Israeli World Government.'

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"With that machine — now in the hands of the Zionists — they hoped to win over the minds of men: using its psychic radiations to convert, to persuade the aggressor against aggression. A powerful weapon for good or evil, the operating formula for which is locked into the very chemical fibers of your body —"

A brief, faint expression of distaste curled the corner of his mouth, as if he regarded Truck, too, as piece of machinery and regretted having to negotiate rather than turn a switch.

(While Truck began to see a peculiar irony in it all; far off in his skull, he could hear the dead Centaurans slapping their knees, chuckling happily at General Gaw, Dr. Grishkin and now this gullible earnest Arab. He wondered if the device had any real function whatever.)

"Although the UASR would abhor the use of any such weapon," Ben Barka went on, "you must realize that there exists here an opportunity no socialist can ignore. Consider, Captain: the instant, peaceful conversion of the Galaxy to *true* democracy; the beginning of a new era of socialist co-operation.

"The rank of Hero of the UASR is yours if you will aid me in this. Also, an immediate honorary professorship in political science at the University of Cairo... Well?"

John Truck had found Fix the dwarf washed up in the port hinterland of Gloam — disoriented and illiterate among the port women and hustlers, having no real understanding of the twilight subculture that had swallowed him after his escape from the squirearchies and rural manors of Chrome. Drawn together for no reason, as losers sometimes are, they had brawled their way stoned across two thousand light-years before the landing on Sad Al Bari IV: "Getting it on," as Fix would often put it, rolling his eyes and baring his wicked teeth.

Looking at Gadaffi Ben Barka (who knew nothing of this, yet had ended it as if he were some sort of God, without thinking very much), Truck felt a terrible weariness seep into his bones. Lacking even the strength to laugh at the Arab, he said:

"Why did you kill my bosun?"

Ben Barka sighed.

"Captain, you owe the Zionists nothing. You are a spacer."

"I owe you nothing, either. You didn't even notice him really, did you? I don't want your professorship, I want to kill you."

"Very well, Captain."

The command cabin of a Transit class hauler is laid out with dual controls and duplicated instruments; two acceleration chairs, facing the direction of

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travel, provide access to these; a third can be brought up on runners from the rear of the bridge and locked into place abreast of the other two. Colonel Ben Barka settled himself in that chair. He pointed his pistol at Tiny's head.

"I want to go to Alpha Centauri. Presumably, Captain, you would like to keep this friend?" He passed Truck a set of punched co-ordinates. "That is our actual destination on Centauri VII."

"Be it on your own head, Colonel."

Truck engaged a bank of rocker switches below the navigation display board and warmed up the preorbit engines. *My Ella Speed* shook and rumbled. Truck pulled the cargo hatch in, thinking of Fix. He got a go-ahead from the port authority. Two monstrous LTOA vehicles moved in across the dock and stood the boat on her tail. He checked Tiny's set of controls, then worked the lift jets up and down through their power curve.

"I can go anytime you want, Colonel."

"Do it."

My Ella Speed, well into the spirit of the thing, coughed, shuddered, and threw herself upwards.

While the colossal cruisers of the UASR Navy have "inertia envelope" environments which shield their crews against the crippling G effects of a battle maneuver, third-hand Transit class haulers do not. They are safe from inertia only during dyne-flux shifts; and *My Ella Speed,* lustily fighting the attraction of Sad Al Bari IV, made it from total rest to escape speed in a very short time indeed.

Truck and Tiny, accustomed to such violent lifts, took it stoically, with G tugging their faces out of shape and pummeling their rib cages.

Colonel Gadaffi Ben Barka, on the other hand, was used to a different kind of travel. He dropped his Chambers almost immediately. His eyes rolled and protruded, he gasped and sobbed. His skull snapped back against his headrest, and his features melted like hot plastic. His eyelids closed, and a trickle of dark blood ran out of his left nostril, sluggishly. His tongue poked out from beneath his trim mustache like a misshapen fig. He passed out.

"So up you, Colonel," said John Truck as he settled his boat into a holding orbit and ran some more checking sequences. "Up you."

Tiny Skeffern unstrapped himself. "Shoot him?" he asked, getting hold of the pistol, which had fallen by his feet. Even a 2 mm Chambers looked large in his childlike hand.

"No, I'm going to put him out the rear lock. It's something I just

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thought of," said Truck. He laughed nastily. "He will look quite splendid coming down on the nightside."

He took the colonel beneath the armpits and with difficulty hauled him aft, bruising the limp body in frequent collisions with bulkheads and pieces of machinery. Even though Ben Barka was still unconscious, he told him several times how he would feel as he pursued his graveyard orbit and terminal fall.

But when he arrived in the cargo bay, he forgot about it for a time; and when he had finished composing Fix the bosun's torn corpse, he decided to put the colonel in a suit after all. "You can bloody hang about up here with a beacon on until somebody fetches you. It's worse than you gave him." It wasn't, but the violent stratum had submerged again, and for that Truck was grateful. He went forward, sealed the bulkheads, and evacuated the hold with no prayers.

Ben Barka's suit began to broadcast immediately and indiscriminately — an all-band distress call. Truck switched the receiving gear off.

"Tiny," he said, "start the Dynaflows. I am going to take a look at this device thing."

He fired up the navigationn board and set *My Ella Speed* to hunting like a three-dimensional compass needle until her blunt prow pointed at Alpha Centauri (or at a spot where her sluggish internal processes remembered it to be). Tiny got the converters operating and came back to the bridge. Vision screens shimmered eerily, electrical stuff blinked and clicked. "Right on," said Truck.

He cut in the Dynaflows, pushed the throttles about, and *My Ella Speed* howled down the Galactic freeway, through the queer shifting dyne-fields toward the Centauri system, on overdrive.

"Getting it on": Out in space, other winds blew. While thoughtful Truck brooded around the exterior screens, gazing at the flying streamers of illusion produced by *Ella's* improbable progress, Tiny Skeffern patched his Fender into her communications equipment. Broadcasting the Dynaflow Blues into the quaking, distorted universe outside — trailing slow ribbons of tachyon noise that might someday and in some unimaginably distant place be received and decoded as a stretched, alien music — the ship groped and crabbed and hurtled her way by turns a few thousand light-years closer to her captain's destiny. Truck and Tiny ate and slept rarely. It is peculiar that neither of them noticed the cruisers *Suliman* and *Nasser* entering the Centauri system; perhaps they were

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too occupied by landing maneuvers at the time.

John Truck brought his boat down along a bright line of lavender flame, aiming for Ben Barka's co-ordinates. She settled on a flat tract of mud, hissing and contracting, steaming. After some minutes, Truck and Tiny emerged from the cargo bay, grotesquely got up in lead-glass goggles, white carbon-fiber helmets, and respirauptors like squat black snouts. Tight coveralls of thick dark plastic covered their bodies, which were full of antiradiation drugs and amphetamines.

Only one planet was ever killed — although Weber II was left with uninhabitable areas after the police action of General Gaw, it was never actually killed. In that respect, Centauri VII was a unique achievement.

The MIEV warheads had boiled off a lot of the surface water, but it had been steadily recondensing over the years, falling evenly over the new landscape of the planet to collect in stagnant, shallow pools and immense fens. Twilight was continual; corpse-lights flickered and danced; under a grey-green luminous sky, Truck and Tiny picked their way between the blasted, mysterious columns of masonry that poked up out of the silt.

Struggling and miserable, they wandered along the indistinct banks of a slow, clogged watercourse, looking for a sign: which they found in the shape of Omega Shaft. By that time, Truck was suffering from a considerable malaise of the head. The broken masonry depressed him, and he was disturbed by the puzzling fibrous consistency of the mud. A tangle of thin eroded bones, white and luminescent, caught at his feet. He felt like a man on a final pilgrimage — and, conversely, as if an initiation lay before him. Perhaps he had expected more evidence of his mother's race.

Hidden in a freak fold of land, the Omega Shaft complex of buildings — from which Dr. Grishkin had begun the excavation (or, more properly, bore) that was to culminate in the discovery of the Centauri Device — was a sprawl of massive precast concrete sheds, dull in color and filmed with an unpleasant moisture. They served to house the generators, air exchangers and lift motors of the shaft, a collection of machinery that in operation caused the earth around to vibrate palpably.

Subsonics from the deeper level of the bore itself trembled in Truck's bones as he stood with Tiny beyond the range of the arc lamps which surrounded the buildings, sweating in the heat of the nearest

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extractor outlet. A small stubby ship was parked on its tail in the gloom a hundred yards away from the checkpoint in the fence, but there was no sign of the fleet police or of any military activity. The gates (and, indeed, the entire complex) seemed to be deserted.

John Truck shrugged. He turned to the dim, snouted little figure beside him, and pantomimed an advance. In silence, and moving slowly, like performers in a decadent choreography, they made it to the checkpoint. No one greeted them. Two dead fleet men, their goggles shattered by the explosion that had buckled and melted the gates, lay face-down in the mud, their coveralls charred. Truck stole their guns.

Has somebody been here already? he asked himself.

Bodies littered the shaft head, flung radially away from the center of a second explosion. Truck attempted to scratch his head through his helmet.

"They've all had it," said Tiny Skeffern," "I think."

Filtering out through the capillaries of the respirator, his voice was flat and ghoulish. He bobbed about, looking at the corpses and snapping his fingers, while Truck located the mechanisms of the elevator. The shaft head was throbbing about them like a plucked string. They sealed the pressure doors of the lift cage and began their descent into the crust of Centauri VII.

Truck had no sense of homecoming. Two miles down, he checked his dosimeter in case he'd picked up any of the active cesium floating about on the surface. Two and a half, and he imagined the earth groaning and shifting beyond Omega Shaft. It didn't happen.

The Centauri bunker system had ruptured in two or three places, and for a century water had been leaking down the Centaurans' own exit bores; so although the temperature was high, the air was humid, and shapeless clumps of mold grew on the walls of the filter passages and transit lanes. Dr. Grishkin's team had introduced temporary lighting into the major tunnels.

"Stay here and stop anyone who tries to come down," Truck told Tiny, "but keep out of the cage, because it can be worked from up there." Tiny shuffled and nodded. He poked Truck in the ribs. He brandished his stolen weapon.

Truck consulted his luck and chose a direction at random. He passed deep alcoves full of corroding machinery. *Old, old,* said the echoes of his footfalls, and he was unnerved. When he looked back, he couldn't see Tiny or the bottom of Omega Shaft. He kept his hand on his gun. Ten minutes of

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walking brought him to the anteroom of the central bunker, where luminous fungi flourished on pipes and cables and algae dripped from the outputs of the ventilation plant like a hanging garden.

On balance, Captain John Truck preferred light to darkness. If that seems trite, then remember that he had made this decision long before he stepped over the threshold of the bunker on Centauri, and he meant it literally. Though he loved the streets after nightfall — the cold, blind, littered alleys of the docklands — he found his true milieu out among the weird spectral particle displays of the dyne-field, and he had watched the kaleidomats of a hundred different Spacer's Raves on thirty planets until his brain resonated to the beat of their strobes and their abrupt, insane shifts of wavelength. None of that, however, prepared him for the Centauri Device.

As he entered the bunker, it seemed to him as if his head had swollen to fill it — Wild bursts of flame ignited inside him — His optic nerves exploded immediately, but he still saw — Electric showers and sleets — Gold, green, ultramarine, timed to a metronome in his thalamus — Iridescent, viridescent, albescent, nascent — Funereal purples, quaking acid greens, april blue, chevrolet planets — Wet harmonic dimensions — Voids — Endless vibrating continua of Time and Space —

When his eyesight had returned and his insight had left him, he found that his limbs were paralyzed. He became aware of probes: fire laced the lattice of his central nervous system; fingernails scraped samples from the marrow of his bones; there were unbelievable methods of genetic exploration loose in his skull and gnawing.

During this phase of the process, the Device showed him what it was he most desired: the secret of a new propulsion fitted to his boat, immense concentric brass wheels that would enable him to shoot though to the galaxies beyond — they turned with a sickening slowness; a girl he had never seen; Fix the dwarf, alive and baring his filed teeth, his stomach all sewn up; finally, and very briefly, Tiny Skeffern, playing an unknown blues from the stage of The Spacer's Rave.

When he failed to show an exclusive preference for any one of these things — being a spacer and a loser, he desired all and none of them — the Device released him, leaving him the realization that it was itself responsible for the conflicting descriptions of its own function. With that realization he saw it as its maker had seen it, and the probes receded from his body.

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His mother's genes had been identified.

It had tested him, and passed him, and he knew he could operate it. But he still didn't know what it did.

He stood before it, his muscles tetanized, his joints locked.

He was brought to himself by the sound of gunfire echoing down the Fallopian passages of the complex. He put the Centauri Device under his arm and ran from the Chamber.

His limbs were shaking with reaction; he was forced to slow to a trot, and cold premonitions whispered through his skull. His repirator tasted filthy; sweat crawled like worms between his plastic suit and his skin. He heard no more gunfire. He discovered Tiny Skeffern a few feet away from the lift cage at the bottom of Omega Shaft.

Tiny was lying with his face to the wall, and he had lost his gun.

Truck had no strength left for anything. He sat down beside the corpse and dropped the Centauri Device. It rolled away from him. Its influence had not been confined entirely to the key bunker — during the period of examination, had it somehow sensed Tiny's impending end? He kicked out at it feebly, blaming it for the death. He heard a soft noise behind him.

Dr. Grishkin wore his red Opener's cloak over a black radiation suit. Stepping out of one of the minor transit lanes, he had a bemused and nervous air. He stood for some time staring at John Truck, his eyes enigmatic behind the smoky panes of his goggles. His respirator hissed.

"I keep coming back here," he said suddenly. "You know, I mapped this place for IWG. I was never lost in it before." He advanced a few paces, still gazing at Truck. "I knew you'd come here eventually. The Ark has a gravity of its own. You must help me now."

He saw the Centauri Device. He shuddered, stiffened, rubbed his hands over his goggles. Then, his immense bulk quivering and collapsing like a dead pig, he knelt before it. He fumbled with one fat hand at the neck of his coverall, pulled, unzipped it to expose his plastic windows. He knelt there, head bowed, revealing the processes of his soul.

"The light," he whispered.

John Truck got to his feet. He grabbed Grishkin by the nape of his neck and tried to force him to face Tiny Skeffern's corpse. "You disgusting sod. Open your dirty head to *him*. Go on, do it. Look at him!" He brought the Opener's left arm up behind his back and pulled. Grishkin yelped, struggled. He was absurdly heavy. He tore himself

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away and returned to the Device.

He raised his head and spread his arms slowly.

"My son, you must understand. *I kept coming back here.* I was lost. There are so many tunnels."

Truck raised his stolen Chambers and fired it at one of Grishkin's windows. He pulled the Device from beneath the body while the concussion was still echoing through the bunkers and wiped the stinking fluids off it with a corner of the Opener's cloak. He got into the lift and returned to the surface. Halfway on his long journey back to *My Ella Speed,* his dosimeter reported a mild overexposure.

A compulsion to keep the Device close led him to secure it in the command cabin rather than the hold. Weakened by Centauri VII's contaminated atmosphere, he passed out on lift-off. Later, hanging a few hundred miles above the planet, he plotted a course to the Galaxy's nearest edge, where he could dispose of the thing for good. He had no desire to ascertain its purpose. When, after treating his overdose symptoms, he felt no better, he began to suspect that it was in some way leeching energy from him for its own use.

He was down in the engine room powering up the Dynaflows when something collided with *My Ella Speed.* She groaned, lurched, spun. Air began to whistle out of a hairline rupture somewhere in the cargo bay. All the lights went out. Truck, weightless, was thrown across the engine room, tumbling as he went. He fetched up against one of the motors, screamed and wet himself as two of his ribs caved in. When he tried to gain an even keel, his legs refused to work.

Numb and frightened, he hauled himself laboriously through the command bridge hatch and sealed the bulkheads.

Transit class haulers have no emergency lighting. A wan, eerie radiation filtered through the vision screens, reflected from Centauri VII. An immense, pitted hull curved away from *My Ella Speed,* touching her only at the point of collision, where it was locked on by power grapples. Truck smiled bitterly, put his hand on the Centauri Device — he almost believed he felt it throb — and waited for the standard fleet boarding procedure to be completed. *My Ella Speed* lurched again, and he fell to the deck as the cruiser outside extended its envelope of artificial gravity to include her.

He considered jamming the forward airlock, but it was too late.

He was moved to something like admiration when General Alice Gaw came through it, gross and lumpy in her one-piece vacuum

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suit, a fragmentation grenade in each hand and a portable laser at her belt.

"Don't try it, chummie," said her helmet speaker. When she saw him slumped against the instrument panel, she relaxed. "Messed you up a bit, have we? Well, you can't blame me for that. Don't let it worry you, Truck, because you've just been reconscripted, and fleet doctors have a lot of experience with this sort of injury."

She put up her grenades. The airlock cycled: three fleet policemen left it and stood behind her. One helped her to remove her helmet; the others fiddled with her weapons and eyed Truck curiously.

"Where is it?"

(Adjusting her eyepatch and running a hand through her cropped hair.)

Truck grinned. He laid the Device in his lap and said:

"It's here, General. No, I would stay put if I were you. You're talking to a Centauran."

He believed this: that it was possible to see himself as a directed inevitable metaphysical link between the Centauri Genocide and the deaths of his friends. All us losers are Centaurans, he thought.

General Gaw put her head on one side and squinted at him.

"You'll regret that, laddie," she told him. And: "It doesn't look like the thing I saw in the bunker."

"It went into its armed mode three hours ago. Priming is automatic once it identifies a Centauran, General. You only saw its dormant phase."

Pain leaked into his pelvic area. His legs were coming back to life. A spasm of his lower intestine made him think of Grishkin the Opener.

"I can operate it at any time. Whatever made you think you'd be any closer to owning it when you found your Centauran?"

General Gaw laughed, showing her strong white teeth.

"Chummie-boy, from the stink in here, I'd say you've damaged your disgusting insides. What's to stop me waiting until you collapse completely?"

"I promise you, General," said Truck, "that I'll fire it off if that looks like happening. I've got nothing left to loose, really."

The general took one of her policemen aside and whispered to him. He replaced his helmet, saluted, and vanished through the airlock. Truck wasn't paying much attention; he found breathing difficult, and his lower abdomen was a huge swollen bag of agony whenever he moved. Successive wave fronts of nausea and vertigo swept through him. The Centauri Device had become a palpable presence in his head, a vibration through each cell of his brain.

"Truck," said General Gaw, "I

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hope you aren't waiting for your scummie Arab friends to pull you out of this. Bring him through, Corporal."

Impelled by the pressure of the policeman's weapon in the small of his back, Colonel Gadaffi Ben Barka stumbled through the lock. He was still wearing *My Ella Speed's* spare vacuum suit, which had been decorated in arty pink dayglo stripes by a gay friend of Truck's. He stood swaying for a moment, fiddling with his helmet catches. The corporal knocked him about a little and then did it for him.

His face was bruised about the forehead and cheekbones; a shiny false skin of Nobecutane had been applied to a cut on his cheek. He nodded stiffly in Truck's direction, curled his lip at the general.

"We picked this scab out of a decaying orbit round Sad Al Bari IV. We know he paid you a visit, laddie. What arrangements were made? Don't deny that the UASRN *Nasser* followed you here."

Truck was retreating. He couldn't imagine what she was getting at. "You are insane, General." He was aware of her voice, accusing, fading. Pain lapped at the shores of his skull. The Device seemed to be telling him things. He woke up abruptly, to find the corporal bullying Ben Barka back into his helmet.

"Wait!" cried Truck. "General, make me a bid."

She looked down at him. She shook her head.

"It's you who's out of his mind, duckie. We've got you now, unless you do something quickly. I wonder if you'll have the guts to work that thing?"

Truck waved his arm impatiently, groaned.

"General," he whispered, "Now's the time. You want the Device and me to operate it for you. So tell my why. Tell me how the Galaxy will benefit by it. In exchange, I'll tell you something about yourself —"

His head was clearing. He knew he had to have an answer and from both of them. He was sorry that Grishkin the Opener had died because he too could have made a reply.

This time, Truck knew for whom he was speaking: they stood behind him in some remote area of his brain, the hustlers and losers and people who had nowhere to sleep at night; he was asking for a dwarf, a musician, and a dead Centauran whore. They waited behind his eyes — stoned, tired, grimy and passive — the New Centaurans.

General Gaw spoke to them.

"You know the form, Truck," she said. "'IWG exists to promote the free flow of galactic capital; to

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enlarge the possibilities for peaceful exchange and trade; and thereby to make possible the continuing growth of the gross galactic product.' We represent law, Truck, and progress toward a better standard of living.

"You know it, you're alive because of it, and the Device will keep it that way."

From the windy concrete plains of Anywhere, the bleak industrial complexes of Morpheus, the radio-deserts of Weber II — and from the filthy, vapor-lit port hinterlands and slums of every planet in the Galaxy — the New Centaurans crowded into that junction box between past and present atrocities which was John Truck's skull.

They were silent.

"Well, Truck?" General Gaw bent over him anxiously, as if she sensed a little of what he represented at that moment. He knew she didn't.

"Let Ben Barka make his bid," he said.

"Laddie, you are really delirious if you think —"

"Let him speak!" hissed John Truck. He tried to lift himself, to beckon the Arab closer, and fell back. "Tell me, Colonel. What's your offer?"

Ben Barka looked puzzled. He studied John Truck's white, sunken face and gazed suspiciously at the fleet men who flanked him. At a nod from General Gaw they pushed him forward.

"If this is some sort of a trap —

"Very well, then. The Zionists rape the Galaxy; they plunder its resources and exploit criminally its labor force. Used in the interests of a genuine Socialist revolution, the Device would bring about peace, an adjustment of wrongs, a redress of the balance, a just sharing of profit by the labor force."

Truck closed his eyes, exhausted by the strain of keeping the Arab in focus for the crowd behind his brain, haunted by the light of the dead planet beneath.

They were leaving him, in twos and threes, evaporating, fading into fields and fluxes more subtle than any his Dynaflows could create. When they had gone — refugees from death and life, shuffling back down the light-years and centuries, hunched up against the eternal Compass Wind — he smiled over his bitter disappointment.

"It isn't enough," he murmured. "Neither of you met the reserve price. So I am left with this thing.

"Listen: the Centauri genes have been scattering themselves over the Galaxy for two hundred years. General, there's a survivor of the Genocide in every drifter who ever lifted from a planet.

"And they're sick of both you

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and the UASR because you place ideas and objects over people. The Device belongs to them. It's heavy, and I don't pretend to know what it does, even if you do. You see in it only the symbol of your own obsessions.

"Let's find out, shall we?"

Captain John Truck, late of Sad Al Bari IV, the last of the Old Centaurans and the first of the New, let the Device into his head. It throbbed. It leapt to meet him, pulsing, whispering. He laughed. He moved his dying hands across it, *thus,* and *so,* and

ADDENDUM: The above is not a fiction, but a dramatized account of circumstances leading to the Alpha Centauri hypernova of 2450AD, and the formation of what is known in hinterland argot as "Truck's Gap" — that curious spatial discontinuity which engulfed everything within a radius of ten light-years of the destroyed star and freed the Galaxy from the obsolete political and social chains of Terran thinking.

Several sources were used in compiling this account: secret files relating to the mysterious "Centauri Device" discovered at both IWG and UASR embassies on Sad Al Bari IV; records of tachyon transmissions by the cruisers *Nasser* and *Suliman,* which continued until a few minutes before the catastrophe; and evidence gathered over ten years from spacers who knew or had talked with Captain John Truck.

We have no record of the mode of operation of the Centauri Device — this text follows the most popular of the "psychic" theories. And we have, of course, no clue whatever to the appearance of the Device in its armed phase: the only descriptions extant relate to what was seen in the Omega Shaft bunker by Dr. Grishkin's archeological team, General Gaw and her police, and the UASR agent Colonel Ben Barka. It was decided, therefore, that no description of the Device after its priming would be included in this account.

Most fascinating of the enigmas presented here is Truck's own motivation. Did he see his action as a belated revenge on the part of his mother's race? — Or was he simply disgusted by the irrelevance to reality of the politics of his time? He has been cast in both these roles in previous accounts. Again: his decision to operate the Device may have been the result of an insane but understandable desire to avenge the death of his two friends — or he may simply have triggered it accidentally, while delirious from the internal injuries received in the collision between *My Ella Speed* and the *Suliman.*

There are even grounds for

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consideration of that peculiar and poetic myth of the spaceport subculture — the belief that John Truck destroyed Earth as a proxy of the "New Centaurans," those fabulous underground denizens of the dockland slums and the dyne-fields, who will someday emerge as the true inheritors of the Galaxy.

The reader must judge that for himself.

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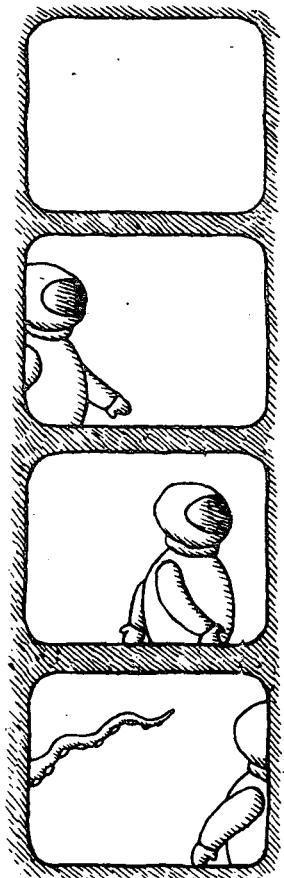
JESUS WITH JETS

Reviewing *Jesus Christ Superstar* in this space may strike some people as unlikely; for my part, I believe the Judeo-Christian mythology just that — mythology rooted in fact as is the Greek, Scandanavian, Hindu or whatever. Overfamiliarity forced by being reared in a Sunday school culture had deprived many of us from seeing some fascinating stories in our own backyard, as it were. Before you start bombarding me with fundamentalist theological arguments, let me say that I would not review "King of Kings" or such like here; it is the style of the current film that interests me. To repeat a point I've made several times here about fantastic style — any story, fact or fiction, can be made into a fantastic experience in film in various ways, and in this current film, the familiar story has become a phantasmagoria.

One of the ways this has been done has been by a deliberate use of anachronism. Anachronism has been a minor but consistent device in fantasy; the prime example that comes to mind is T. H. White's "The Once and Future King" where periods were mixed so skillfully that I really had to stop and think if it were possible for Merlin to own a copy of the 14th

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In expert hands it is a prime source of humor, but more subtly it is, paradoxically, a device for heightening reality: to make *real* aspects of a distant period that would otherwise be remote. In Christopher Morley's "The Trojan Horse" Cassandra is the leader of the peace party of Troy, and the horse is a monstrous armored vehicle breathing napalm — *that* certainly brings the Iliad more to home than Homer.

In JC, anachronism is used on both levels — not humor exactly, but as a removal *from* reality — in deliberate contrast to all the Biblical epics (which are, of course, fantasies in their own ways), and also complementing the rock score which, as source point for the whole production, is the major anachronism. The result is a strange period mixture, as fascinating as some of the medieval cultures *cum* rayguns that were endemic in s-f. Jesus's followers are blue-jeaned, tank-topped kids. Herod's court is a decadent lot in colored wigs, outrageous sun glasses, and transparent bubble umbrellas to ward off the Judean sun. The Roman soldiers wear regulation combat boots and trousers, imperial purple tank tops (some with Ceasar's-head stencils) and polished aluminum hard hats. It was baffling to me that most of the big-time reviewers confessed to being baffled at the introduction of tanks and jets at one point. They clearly represented the military might of Rome and were used beautifully. The final production number, which in a Rogers and Hammerstein musical would be called the dream ballet, is a confrontation between Jesus and Judas, supported by a shimmying heavenly host in silver fringe, low rise hot pants and boots.

Tying in with this, but a separate element, is an outright use of the fantastic in the sets and costumes. This is a deliberate never-never-land stylization of the visual that I enjoyed as I enjoy mind's eye fantasies evoked by authors such as Merritt and Dunsany. Herod's court floats on white rafts in a waveless sea. The Jewish priesthood sports bulbous black headgear and black cloaks and is straight out of Clark Ashton Smith. The action takes place either in lunar desert landscapes or in archeological sites from the Roman period — roofless palaces and crumbling amphitheatres. One wonderful moment is set in a place consisting of nothing but a series of classic columns rising from an arid plain. A joyous crowd appears among them one by one, tumbling and cartwheeling literally out of thin air.

This is far from a great movie. The music, which is basic (it *is* an

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opera), is often banal and slows down the action to a crawl at times. Performances are uneven. And one ends up wondering what the real point of the whole thing is — or at least this one did. But as an exercise in visual imagination, it is quite wonderful.

In the same vein, a movie I've been meaning to mention for some time and haven't had a chance to is *Brother Sun, Sister Moon.* Zeffirelli's version of the St. Francis legend has no supernatural elements in it whatsoever (not even those damn birds), but visually it's Tolkien out of Peake. His Assissi is an enchanted land of endless poppy fields and distant towers, and the recreation of a medieval Papal court, with figures in blazing Byzantine robes and a flight of white marble stairs that goes on almost forever, literally defies description.

Things-to-come dept....According to a New York Times preview of the coming movie season, this is going to be a big one for supernatural films, kicking off with "The Exorcist" (as yet unreleased at this writing)..."Genesis II," the TV movie of last season which was a cut above most such excursions into s-f, may end up a mid-season series. (And judging by the dreary fall schedule, they'll need a lot of mid-season replacements). Sounds good, but I have strong doubts of any series maintaining quality after the first three or four shows (Star Trek ever the great exception — it took nearly two years to go downhill).

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Ruth Berman ("3-OK," July 1972) was recently nominated for the John W. Campbell Award as best new writer for 1973. Her new story, is an effective and moving variation on the theme of Are We Ready To Join the Galactic Federation.

A Board In the Other Direction

by RUTH BERMAN

Iskander was senile.

Having no children, he was therefore, of course, entered in a state home. It would not necessarily have made any difference if he'd had any; the homes were lavishly funded, thanks to the votes of the young and guilty. But he might then have had visits and outings to look forward to. As it was, he had nothing to do except look at pieces he no longer knew how to move. On bad days there was nothing but the varying smells of food, deodorant, urine, and feces to occupy his failing senses. On warm days he could go into the garden.

A bright torus, checkered with blue-steel and white-steel magnetic squares, spun on the clear plastic axis attaching it to the clear plastic frame. The plastic was as near invisible as makes no difference, to kibitzers, but to the players it was half-glimpsed curves of light broken into rainbows and reflecting stray bits of color on the board and the blue and white pieces jutting out all over it.

There were some who had said they had seen that Iskander was failing even before Mbara of Uganda beat him, 13 variations out of 20. But others, who knew Mbara's play better, said that they were both in top form and Mbara had genuinely become the better player. They said it was the shock of losing to a youngster which had ended him.

In fact, Mbara was quite old enough to be tagged as a spinster, married like Iskander to the game alone. It caused quite a stir when she married the following month — and to a nonplayer, at that.

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The sunlight was clear and harsh on the dusty park ground. An ordinary chessboard was marked out, but the pieces on it were living men, armed with wooden swords and shields, and sweating heavily under their padding.

Iskander was delighted when he found himself faced with two visitors, at last, on a warm day. Dimly, he heard the words, "Copter ride."

"Yes, yes," he said eagerly. "Copter ride. Most kind of you, Mr...Most...Yes." He plucked at the diapers he wore, trying to express his pleasure by freeing himself from the constriction, but they were fastened too securely. He was too excited at the prospect of a ride to mind, however.

But once they were in the copter, one of the men poked him with a needle. He sobbed at this unkindness until he felt himself growing drowsy, and then he went to sleep.

He woke to find himself on a couch in a sunny room. A woman of 65 or so sat rocking opposite him. She looked familiar, but it was not until he tried subtracting years from her face that he recognized her. He sat up slowly, pulling himself on the rim of the couch. "Hello, Miriam. Been a long time. Still in politics?"

"Yes. How do you feel?"

"Fine. And you?" But he had no sooner finished the formality of the exchange than he realized that he did not feel fine. He felt weak and — oddly — happy. The first was not unusual of late. The second seemed strange. It was not as if he had played an interesting game that day. In fact, he had not played since he could not think when. At that thought, the pawns in his head leaped forward on a dozen different kinds of chessboards, and he knew that he could continue all those games to their ends. Which was as it should be, but not as it had been recently.

The bullet shot over the board....A green knight hop-frogged over a white to take a red pawn....The Fool circled idly around the other pieces and cut down the Moon....

"Well as can be expected," Miriam was saying, and her words took up no more time than Iskander needed to orient himself.

"Testing some kind of intelligence drug on me?" he said as soon as she stopped.

One side of her mouth quirked up, and she leaned forward, saying, "Not exactly. It's an experimental drug which allows the body to tap reserves of energy to overcome the effects of old age."

"Indeed. What happens when the reserves run out?"

She hesitated, and stopped rocking for a moment.

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"Death? It's not like you to be sentimental, my dear."

"No, I suppose not." She started the rocker going again. "It's a dangerous drug, certainly. It'll be quite a few hours before you need to worry about unpleasant side effects, though. If you want out of the project, before then, we can reverse it."

"Who do you want me to play?" he said eagerly.

'I didn't say it was chess."

"What else could I possibly mean?"

"That's not a fair way to put it, Zander."

He smiled at her and shrugged. "No. But who do you want me to play? And Why?"

She stopped rocking and stretched herself up out of the chair. "You get dressed and come out. I'll show you." She pointed at a suit draped over the end of the couch, and left the room.

Iskander looked down at himself, dressed in diapers, plastic pants, and sandals. He felt a quick flash of nudity-taboo embarrassment, followed by disgust at the appearance of his body. He tried to suppress that reaction as equally irrational, but failing, ignored his feelings as well as he could and simply began dressing. The suit provided was one of his own from a few years back. It had become a little too large for him, but the looseness of the fabric was pleasant.

"Ready," said Iskander. He stepped through the door into a long, windowless corridor. He blinked for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the change in light.

"Good," said Miriam.

An intense gentleman standing beside her immediately broke into protest. "Madam Chairman," he said, "Have you warned —"

"Yes, of course. Iskander, this is Dr. Hudek. He will be very annoyed with me if anything happens to you."

"Oh, do you play chess, Doctor?" said Iskander, bowing.

"No," said Hudek, obviously puzzled by the question.

"No, he's just a physician," Miriam explained. "This way." She set off down the corridor, and the two men followed.

A Bishop's Pawn opening was unusual, but the QBP was a better fighter than a Live Pawn should be, and worth using as a major piece.

Miriam took them into a small room with a one-way glass wall opposite the door. It looked into a council chamber and was fitted up with outlets for tri-d cameras and tapers, along with pencil sharpeners and the other esoteric paraphernalia of the press.

"Do you plan to broadcast the game?" Iskander asked. He felt out of place, almost a little dizzy at

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being in a pressroom. He had watched broadcasts of other people's matches often enough, and so he knew what such rooms looked like — or at least what the front sections of them looked like — and he knew that he had been watched many times from such rooms, but he had never been in one before.

"No, we'll only record it," Miriam said. "But there's your opponent."

He glanced quickly at the figure seated at a table going over some papers, and looked back to Miriam, astonished. "It's not Mbara."

"Zander! You're impossible. Why should we risk your life to play her?"

"For the sake of the game?" Iskander made it sound joking, although it wasn't really. "If it's anyone else, why didn't you get Mbara?"

"We would have," Miriam said. "But she died in childbirth a few months ago."

"So I wasn't your first choice," Iskander said regretfully.

"That's irrelevant, Zander. By the way, you still haven't looked at your opponent properly."

Iskander looked. His opponent was...a dryad? It had delicate facial bones, like a woman, but a straight-lined body, like a man. It had brown skin, perhaps a little darker than his own, and long green hair, braced up over golden combs on the head, giving a crownlike effect, then falling like a cloak down the back. But even more than the hair, the set of the face and the lines of the body were wrong: the eyes too large and set too wide, the shoulders sloping down too much from the neck, the legs and arms too long. And the most startling wrongness of all was that each of the individual oddities looked right on it. It was not deformed, it was simply not human. And it was beautiful. He found himself tracing designs in the air with one finger. He wanted to get some clay — no, wood was better — and carve a copy of it to be the Magician in a set of Tarotchess pieces or should it be the Fool? But if he carved it dancing like the Fool, how would those long limbs shape themselves to show arrested motion? And what kind of dog would fit with a Fool carved in that likeness?

"Zander?"

"Won't you sit down, sir?" Hudek set a chair behind Iskander, nudging it close enough to touch his legs.

Iskander sat down automatically, then came out of it enough to smile at Hudek. "I'm all right, Doctor. Don't worry."

Miriam sat down in a chair level with his. "Well, Zander."

"From outer space?"

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"Right." She nodded, as if granting him a point. "You hadn't heard about the Visitors before, I think?"

"No."

"They represent a confederation of intelligent beings within our Galaxy. They maintain a fleet of scout ships to go around checking promising planets every so often to find peoples ready for membership. The basic criteria are space travel and world government."

"Defined how?" said Iskander.

"Cautious, aren't you? Yes, that's the stinger. Defined as interstellar travel — which, we gather, is most economically managed by treating space-time as four spatial dimensions and traveling cross-time to go places — and a government with some reasonable power to enforce its legislation."

"We don't qualify, then. A pity."

"No, we don't. But we're so close to it, I hate to let the opportunity go. And besides...I don't trust people."

Iskander simply nodded, but Hudek's eyes went wide, and for the first time he forgot to address the nominal world leader with respect. "That's a hell of a thing for you to admit!"

"Wait till you're my age, Doctor, and maybe you'll feel the same." She turned back to Iskander. "They made a mistake about us. We were coming along nicely the last time they surveyed us, and they really expected to find us ready for membership this time. Which we almost are, close enough to cause confusion. So they entered openly — in fact; they walked in on a General Assembly debate." For a moment her eyes gleamed uncharitable mirth. "I'm afraid that if they find out the truth and reject us, we'll do something silly. Heaven knows, we have enough tense situations threatening to become wars at any moment. If we can fool them and send them away arranging proceedings to invite us into their confederation, I think...I hope...it'll give us that little extra incentive we need to make peace with each other...at last. We've been so close to peace so long, and so close to Armageddon."

Iskander was silent for a moment. "And the space travel?"

"Less important in their reckoning. And easier. We'll get it soon."

"Mmm. Maybe so." Iskander looked into the council chamber at the being, still intent on its papers.

"Or maybe not," Hudek put in. "Maybe the rejection would give us that little extra incentive, as far as that goes."

"Yes. *Maybe*," said Miriam. "And if this gambit doesn't work, let's hope that one does." She looked at him briefly and then

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turned back to Iskander. "We have all the forms of a world government now — encouraging that mistake is easy. But to keep them thinking we have four-dimensional travel — I'd like you to go out there and play a game of four-dimension chess."

"So. I thought you were leading to that. You really do need Mbara — that variant was her invention. And did anyone ever play it except for her and me?"

"Not a complete game."

"She was a fine player, you know. Playing against her was a kind of heaven, except for losing." He shrugged and half smiled at his own egotism. "But if you don't have her, I'd think a chess-playing mathematician with a specialty in n-dimensional geometry would be your best bet."

"No. You've told me often enough that you can tell a master player from a good one. Our visitor claims to be a master at their equivalent of chess — I gather that it's a good way of spending the time between planetfalls. Both of you will be handicapped, of course, playing an unfamiliar variant, but your familiarity with playing all sorts of variants, I hope, will see you through. You don't have to win, you understand. All you have to do is play well enough to make him think you know what you're doing.

"All right."

The medieval bishop two-stepped its way across the board, to join the slow-moving queen in attack.

They went round by the corridor and entered the council chamber. The alien's big eyes opened even wider. It tossed its head eagerly and cleared away its papers into a sort of briefcase. It said something and a microphone at its throat said, "You are chess master Madam Chairman promised to invite?"

"Yes, how do you do." Iskander bowed.

The alien mimicked the gesture. "White or black?" it said through its mike.

"White," Iskander said without hesitation. He sat down at the table, opposite the alien, and said, "King's pawn-one to king three, level one, cube one."

A board at the side of the room lit up: KP-1, K3-1-1.

"KP-1, K2-2-1," was the answering move.

Iskander nodded. The alien was not going to make orthodox answers, but evidently it wanted to send its pieces out through all dimensions of the "board." But Iskander had chosen white, and he was going to attack so vigorously that the alien would not be able to pursue its own schemes.

Methodically taking his pieces cube by cube across the fourth

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dimension of the game, he hunted the alien's lesser pieces, first, and then its king. The alien was given to skillful use of the knights, cutting across several dimensions of the board at once, and making it hard for Iskander to keep in his mind the complicated structure of the game's hypothetical playing field. Vaguely, he remembered that he and Mbara had once built a representation of a hyper-cube out of two cubes linked by diagonals which should (if they could have gone in another direction through a fourth dimension) have been perpendiculars. Then they had marked their hyper-cube off into tinier hyper-cubes, making a board to play on, insted of playing the game entirely in their heads. But the board was clumsy, and getting at the pieces was a bore; so in the end they found it simpler to do without it.

Iskander concentrated on getting rid of the dangerous knights. Two he got rid of in equal trades, and one in a trade of bishop for knight. He sacrificed a rook for the fourth, after much hesitation. The rooks, too, make confusing cross-dimension moves, but they only cut across one dimension at a time. He made the sacrifice and looked up to find his opponent's wide grey eyes fixed on him. He met the gaze steadily, wondering if it was respect or curiosity. The alien's eyes fell as it turned to consideration of its next move. Iskander found himself trying to imagine what material could reproduce the shifting colors that made up that grey. It wasn't usual to put eyes into chess figures — they weren't meant to be that realistic — but he decided that a chess piece made to that model ought to include eyes, anyway.

The alien took a strand of its hair in its fingers and fidgeted with it as it thought. The line of green flickered brightly against its skin.

That gesture could not be anything but nervousness, Iskander thought, and he played with renewed confidence.

After four hours or so, it occurred to him that his bladder hurt intolerably. He was surprised. Tournament players were used to sitting without relief longer than that. Then he remembered how long it had been since his last tournament and realized that he felt weak, besides. His head hurt, his chest hurt, his hands and feet were cold. "Excuse me," he said, "I need to stop for a few minutes."

The alien blinked several times, then stood up and stretched, shivering all its muscles in turn. "Acceptable," it said. It bowed and left through the door opposite the one Iskander had used.

Iskander bowed in turn, cautiously, and looked around him. He raised his eyebrows at seeing Miriam still there in the room.

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'How are you enjoying the game?" he said facetiously.

"Very much."

On second thought, Iskander corrected himself, she probably did understand much of what was going on, following the game through their reactions to the moves.

Dr. Hudek looked frankly bored and unhappy.

Iskander smiled at him and started out. He stumbled at the doorway, and Hudek promptly came alive, catching him so swiftly that it looked easy.

The doctor looked at him skeptically, but simply said, "Yes. Rest a little before you start again. That may help."

When they resumed play, a half hour later, Iskander felt better, although he could tell that he was weaker than before, because he could feel the weight of his head. He propped it in his hands, and it stopped bothering him.

After two hours more, Iskander announced, "Three moves to mate." He sat back and let his head droop against his chest.

The alien looked thoughtfully at the panel recording their moves and said, "I concede. Thank you. A brilliant game."

"Thanks," Iskander muttered. He thought perhaps he should think of a lengthier and more gracious response, but before he could find one, the alien spoke to Miriam.

"Madam Chairman, I have misapprehended. You travel to near stars, but you have not fourth-dimensional drive to go to far ones. So?"

Her smile shriveled into a blank poker face. She hesitated for a moment, then said, "Yes, that's essentially so. How do you know it?"

The alien curved its arm and hand around to point out Iskander. "Chess master's style. He plays as one not used to thinking in all directions at once — takes only three dimensions at a time."

"I see."

The alien curved its hand down to point out its briefcase. "When you have time, Madam Chairman, we will speak more. There is a concept among your peoples I find most difficult to translate: 'national sovereignty'." It used the native term, but its pronunciation was so awkward that they did not recognize the words until after the mike had given them the entire speech.

"It is difficult to understand," Miriam said equably. The diplomatic smoothness of years was back on her face. "We can discuss it later. Doctor..." She and Hudek helped Iskander from the room.

Hudek had a wheelchair waiting outside that time. Silently,

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he trundled Iskander back to the room where he had wakened and laid him down on the couch.

"Thank you," said Iskander, squirming deeper into the soft fabric. "Very kind of...Very..." He began rubbing at his left arm. "It hurts," he said crossly. He was quiet for a minute, then smiled. "Thanks, Miriam. Lovely game. And now I don't have to go back to the home."

A rook slid over the inside curve of the torus and back up to knock off a knight before the pieces slowed and were still.

Miriam sat down by Iskander and took his right hand. Beside her, Hudek was listening to Iskander's chest. He scowled and took out a needle to inject a painkiller. Then he bent over Iskander's face, breathing air into the lungs. He kept that up for a long time, but nothing happened. At last he gave it up.

"Do you realize you've just killed a man?" he asked, as quietly as he could. "For nothing?"

"For nothing?" Miriam said. She remained as she was for a few moments more. Then she set the hand down and kissed Iskander's cheek. She pulled herself out of the chair and held out her arm to be given Hudek's support as she made her way back to work.

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A new tale from England's Keith Roberts, whose F&SF stories have ranged from the contemporary humor of his Anita stories (November and December 1970) to the brawling adventure of "The Wreck of the 'Kissing Bitch'" (December 1971) and now to the cold and compelling sexuality of...

The Beautiful One

by KEITH ROBERTS

For weeks now the heat had not abated. Day after day the hard sky pressed on the rounded chalk hills; the leaves of trees hung listless and dry; the growing grain yellowed; rivers and ruins shimmered with mirage. The nights were scarcely cooler. Men tossed and grumbled in the stockaded towns; dogs ran snapping and foam-flecked. At such times tempers are short; and the temper of the Horse Warriors was at its best an unsure thing.

Toward the end of one such baking day a column of wagons and riders rumbled steadily between hills of smooth brown grass. At the head of the cavalcade rode a troop of Warriors, their skins tawny, their beards and flowing hair dark. They carried bows and spears; and each man wore a skullcap of burnished steel. Behind them jolted an ornate siege engine, the tip of its throwing arm carved in the likeness of a great horse's head. More Warriors brought up the rear, driving a little rabble of wailing women. Clouds had thickened steadily through the day, trapping the heat even closer to the earth. Thunder boomed and grumbled overhead; from time to time men glanced up uneasily or back to the skyline where showed the palisade and ruined watch-towers of a village. Flames licked them, bright in the gloom; a cloud of velvet smoke hung and stooped, drifting slowly to the south.

Behind the tailboard of the last wagon staggered half a dozen men. They were naked, or nearly so, and streaked with dust and blood. Their wrists were bound; ropes of plaited hide passed round their necks, tethering them to the vehicle. Two more wretches had given up the unequal struggle; the bodies towed

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limply, jolting over the ridges and boulders of the track.

Shouts from ahead brought the column to a halt. The pale dust swirled, settling impartially on men and fumbling at the nooses. A group of men cantered down the line of wagons, reined. They were richly dressed in trews and tunics of figured silk, and each wore a mask of woven grass, fringed with heads of green barley. Their leader carried a gilded Staff of Power; on his chest, proudly blazoned, was the great spear of the Corn Lord.

He nodded now gravely to the Horseman at his side. "You have done well," he said. "The spoil of the first wagon, the grain and unbleached cloth, is forfeit to my God. Also one in ten of the draught animals, and what sheep and goats you drive in from the hills." He held his palms up, fingers spread. "The rest the God returns to you, to do with as you choose. This the Reborn ordered me to say; will it be pleasing to you?"

The other showed his teeth. "Cha'Ensil," he said, "it will be as your Mistress desires. The Horse Warriors too know how to be generous."

But the other had stiffened, eyes glittering through the mask. He said, "What have we here?"

The Horseman shrugged. "Prisoners, for the sacrifice," he said. He glanced at the lowering sky. "Our God becomes impatient when the nights are sultry," he said. "Have you not heard his hooves among the clouds?"

"I heard the Corn Lord chuckle in his sleep," said the priest crushingly. He pointed with the Staff. "Show this one to me," he said. "List his face."

The Warrior grunted, waving an arm. A man dismounted, walked to the prisoner. He twined his fingers in the matted hair, yanked. The priest drew his breath, then reached slowly to unlatch the mask. "Closer," he said. "Bring him here."

The victim was dragged forward. Cha'Ensil stared, then leaned to place strong fingers beneath the other's jaw. The cheekbones were high and delicately shaped, the nose tip-tilted and short. The green-grey eyes, glazed now with pain, were fringed with black. Blood had dried on muzzle and throat; the parted lips showed even white teeth.

A wait, while the oxen belched and grumbled, the horses jangled their bits. Then the priest turned. "He is a little more than a child," he said. "He will not be pleasing to your God." He reached again to jerk at the leather noose. "The Corn Lord claims him," he said. "Put him in the wagon."

The Horseman glared, hand on his sword hilt, face flushed with

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anger; and Cha'Ensil raised the glittering Staff level with his eyes. "This is the God's will," he said. "A little price to pay, for many blessings."

Another wait, while the other pulled at his beard. The priest he would have defied readily enough, but behind him stood One whose displeasure was not lightly to be incurred. The thunder grumbled again, and he shrugged and turned his horse. "Take him," he said sardonically, "since your God gains such pleasure from striplings. The rest will serve our needs."

The priest stared after him, with no friendly expression, then turned, gesturing once more with the Staff. A knife flashed, severing the noose. Released, the prisoner stood swaying; he was bundled forward with scant ceremony, slung into the leading cart. The tailgate was latched shut, and Cha'Ensil rose in his stirrups, with a long yell. Whips cracked; the wagon turned jerkily from the line of march, lumbering to the south.

In the last of the light the vehicle and its escort reached a pass set between high chalk hills. The cloud-wrack, trailing skirts of mist, alternately hid and revealed the bulging slopes, crossed with sheep tracks, set with clumps of darker scrub. On the nearer crest smears and nubbles of black showed the remnants of a village. On the flanks below sprawled a great chalk figure, while foursquare in the pass rose a steep and grassy mound. Across its summit, revealed by flickerings from above, curved a long ridge of roof; around it, among spikes and nodules of stone, straggled a mass of secondary building, pale plastered walls, gables of green-grey thatch. There was a stockade, topped with disemboweling spikes, and a gateway fronted by a deep ditch and flanked by vast drums of stone, themselves leaning till the arrow slits that once had faced the valley stared sightless at the green jungle below. Between them the party cantered, with a final jangle and clash. Torches were called for and a litter, the gates remanned, and Cha'Ensil moved upward across the sloping lower ward. The rising wind fluttered at his cloak, whipping the pine knots into streaming beards of flame.

The little chamber was windowless and hot, hazed with a blue smoke heavy with the scent of poppies. Torchlight gleamed on white walls and close grey thatch, flickered on the Chief Priest's face as he stood expressionlessly, staring down. Finally he nodded. "This is well," he said. "Prepare him. Clean the dirt away."

A rustling of skirts, whisper of feet on the bare earth floor, clink of

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a costly copper bowl. The limbs of the sleeping boy were sponged, his chest and belly washed with scented water. Lastly the stained cloth scrap was cut away.

The priest drew breath between his teeth. "His hands and feet," he said. "Neglect no skill."

The nails of the sleeper were cleaned with pointed sticks, the hair scraped from beneath his arms. His head was raised; his hair rinsed, combed with bone combs and rinsed again. Thunder grumbled close above the roof, and Cha'Ensil whitened his knuckles on his Staff. "Prepare his face," he said. "Use all your art."

Stoppers were withdrawn from jars of faceted crystal; the women, working delicately, heightened the eyelids with a ghosting of dark green, shaped the full brows to a gentler curve. The lashes, already lustrous, were blackened with a tiny brush. The sleeper sighed, and smiled.

"Now," said Cha'Ensil. "Those parts that make him like a God."

The nipples of the boy were stained with a bright dye, and the priest himself laid fingers to the groin, pressing and kneading till the member rose and firmed. Belly and thighs were brushed with a fine red powder, and Cha'Ensil stepped back. "Put the big necklet on him," he said. "And circlets for his arms."

The dreamer was set upright, a cloak of fine wool hung from his shoulders. The women waited, expectantly, and Cha'Ensil once more gripped the boy's chin, turned the face till the brilliant drugged eyes stared into his own. "You were dead," he muttered, "and you were raised. Blood ran from you; it was staunched. Mud dirtied you; it was washed away. Now you go as a God. Go by the Staff and Spear, and the God's strength be with you." He turned away, abruptly. "Take him to the Long House," he said. "Leave him in the place appointed and return to me. We must pray."

The rumbling intensified, till it seemed boulders and great stones were rolled crashing through the sky. Lightning, flickering from cloud to cloud, showed the heads of grasses in restless motion, discovered hills and trees in washes of broad grey light. The light blazed far across the sea, flecking the restless plain of water; then the night was split.

With the breaking of the storm came rain. It fell not as rain customarily falls, but in sheets and solid bars, so that men in far-off villages, woken by the roaring on their roofs, saw what seemed silver spears driven into the earth. The parched dust leaped and quivered; rivulets foamed on the eroded flanks of hills; twigs and green

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leaves were beaten from the taller trees. In the chalk pass the brook that circled the base of the mound raced in its deep bed, but toward dawn the violence died away. A morning wind moved across the hills, searching and cold as a knife; it brought with it a great sweet smell of leaves and fresh-soaked earth.

At first light two figures picked their way across the mound, moving between the fingers and bosses of stone. Both were cloaked, both masked. Once they turned, staring, it seemed, at the flanking slope, the ruins and the chalk colossus that glimmered in the grass; and the taller inclined his head. "My Lady," he said in a strong, musical voice, "when have I injured you, or played you false? When have my words to you not become true?"

The woman's voice when she answered was sharper-edged. "Cha'Ensil," she said, "we are both grown folk, grown older than our years perhaps in service of the God. So keep your tales for the little new priestesses; their lips are sweeter when they are afraid. Or tell them to the Horsemen, who are little children too. Perhaps there was a Great One in the land, long ago; but he left us, in a time best forgotten, and will scarcely return now. It isn't good to joke about such things, least of all to me."

They had reached the portal of the great hut crowning the mound. Above, green rush demons glared eyeless at the distant heath. To either side stood bundles of bound reeds, each taller than a man: the Signs of the God. The priest laid a hand to the nearer, smiling gravely. "Lady," he said, "wise you are most certainly, and wiser in many things than any man. Yet I say this. The God has many forms and lives to some extent in each of us. In most men he is hidden, but I have seen him shine most gloriously. Now I tell you I found him, lashed to a Horseman's wagon. I knew him by the blood he shed, before I saw his face; for all Gods bleed, as penance for their people. I raised him with these hands and placed him where he waits. As you will see."

She stared up at him. "Once," she said coldly, "a child came here, hungering for just such a God. Now I tell you this, Cha'Ensil; I raised you, and what is raised can be thrown down again. If you jest with me, you have jested once too often."

He spread his arms. "Lady," he said humbly, "my hands are at your service, and my heart. If I must give my head, then give it I shall, and that right willingly." He stooped preceding her into the darkness of the hut.

She paused, as always, at sight

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of the remembered place. She saw the floor of swept and beaten earth, the gleam of roofpoles in the half dark; she smelled the great pond-smell of the thatch. At the wattle screens that closed off the end of the long chamber she stopped again, uncertain, and his hand touched her arm. "Behold," he said softly. "see the God..."

The boy lay quiet on the bracken bed within, his breathing even and deep. A woolen shawl partly covered him; the priest lifted it aside and heard her catch her breath. "If I mistook," he said, "then blame the weakness of my eyes on gathering age."

She took his wrist, not looking at him. "Priest," she said huskily, "there is wisdom in you. Wisdom and great love, that chides me what I spoke." She unfastened her cloak, laid it aside. "I will wait with him," she said, "and be here when he wakes. Let no one else approach." She sat quietly on the edge of the bed, her hands in her lap, and Cha'Ensil bowed, slipping silently from the chamber.

Beyond the fringe of trees the hillside sloped broad and brilliant in sunlight. Above the boy as he lay the grass heads arched and whispered, each freighted with its load of golden specks. Between the stems he could see the valley and the tree-grown river, the reed beds where dragonflies hawked through the still afternoons. Beyond the river the chalk hills rose again, distant and massive. On the skyline, just visible from where he lay, stood the stockade and watchtower of his village.

His jerkin was unlaced; he wriggled luxuriously, feeling the coolness of the grass stroke belly and chest. He pulled a stem, lay sucking and nibbling at the sweetness. He closed his eyes; the hum of midsummer faded and boomed close, heavy with the throb of distant tides. Below him the sheep grazed the slope like fat woolen maggots; and the ram moved restlessly, bonking his wooden bell, staring with his little yellow eyes.

The boy's own eyes jerked open, narrowed.

She climbed slowly, crossing the hillside below him, gripping tussocks of grass to steady herself on the steepening slope. Once she straightened, seeming to stare directly toward where he lay; and he frowned and glanced behind him, as if considering further retreat. She stood hands on hips, searching the face of the hill, then turned away, continuing the long climb to the crest. On the skyline she once more turned, a tall, brown-skinned girl, dark hair blowing across face and throat. Then she moved forward, and

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clumps of bushes hid her from his sight.

He groaned, as he had groaned before, a strange, husky noise, half between moan and whimper. His teeth pulled at his lip, distractedly, but already the blood was pounding in his ears. He glared, guilty, at the indifferently cropping sheep, back to the skyline, then rose abruptly, hurrying from the shelter of the trees. Below the crest he stopped, dropping to hands and knees. He wriggled the rest of the way, peered down. The grass of the hillside was lush and long, spangled with the brilliant cups of flowers. He glimpsed her briefly, a hundred paces off, ducked, waited, and scuttled in pursuit.

There was a dell to which she came, he knew it well enough, a private place, screened with tangled bushes, shaded by a massive pale-trunked beech. He reached it panting, crawled to where he could once more see.

She lay on her back beneath the tree, hands clasped behind her head, her legs pushed out straight. Her feet were bare and grimy round the shins; her skirt was drawn up, showing her long brown thighs. He edged forward, parting the grasses, groaning again. A long time she lay, still as a sleeper; then she began. She sat up, passing her hands across her breasts, squeezing them beneath her tunic. Then she pulled at its lacings; then shook her head till the hair cascaded across her face and rolled again and again, showing her belly, the great dark patch that meant now she was a woman.

His whole being seemed concentrated into his eyes; his eyes, and the burning tip of him that pressed the ground. He saw the shrine, unreachable; he saw her fingers go to it and press; he saw her body arch, the vivid grass. Then sun and leaves rushed inward on him as a center; the hillside flickered out, and he lay panting, fingers wet, hearing the echo of a cry that seemed as piercing as the long cry of a bird. After which he collected himself, ran with terror as he had run before, jerkin flapping, to the valley and trees and the safe, crunching sheep. Later he sobbed, for empty nights and days. His neck burned, and his cheek; he begged her forgiveness, she who could not hear, Dareen whose father was rich, owning fifty goats and twice that number of sheep, Dareen whose eyes he never more could meet, never, in the village street.

The dream disturbed him. He moved uneasily, wanting it to end, and in time it seemed his wish was answered. A fume or acrid smoke seared his lungs; voices babbled; hands were on him, pressing down. It seemed he had descended to one of the Hells, where all is din and

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lurid light. He fought against the hands, bearing up with all his strength; and a bowl was thrust before his face. In it coals burned; their fiery breath scorched his throat. He writhed again, trying to pull back his head, but his hair was caught. The coals loomed close, then seemed to recede, till they looked like a whole town burning far off in the night. After which the hard floor no longer pressed his knees. It seemed he was a bird, flying effortlessly upward into regions of greater and greater light. Then he knew he was no bird, but a God. And Dareen came to him, after all the years; he sank into her, rejoicing at last, and was content.

He was conscious at first of cool air on his skin. He rolled over, mumbling. The dream time, though splendid, was finished; soon he must arise and dress, start his morning chores. The soup pots must be skimmed, the fire stoked; billets waited to be split; the two lean cows must be milked. He wondered that he did not hear his father's rattling snores from the corner of the hut. A cock crowed, somewhere close, and he opened his eyes.

At first the dim shapes round him made no sense; then, it seemed on the instant, all memory returned. He leaped, trembling in every limp, to the farthest corner of the bracken bed. The movement woke the woman lying at his side.

Her body was brown, as brown as the remembered body of Dareen, and crusted on arms and legs with bands of gold. Save the rings, she wore nothing but a mask of kingfisher-blue, through which her dark eyes glittered with terror in their gaze, but her voice when she spoke was musical and soft. "Don't be afraid," she said. "Don't be afraid, my Lord. No one will hurt you here." She stretched an arm to him; he shrank farther into the angle of the wall, pushing shoulder blades into the rough wattle at his back. She chuckled at that and said again, "My Lord..." She pulled at the shawl he held gripped. He resisted, knuckles whitening, and it seemed behind the mask she might have smiled. "Why," she said, "you are proud and shy, which is as it should be. But the God has already entered you once, and that most wonderfully." She fell to stroking his calf and thigh, moving her fingers in cool little sweeps, and after a while the trembling of his body eased. "Lie down," she said, "and let me hold you."

Truly it seemed the effects of the Magic Smoke had not yet left him, for despite his fear he felt his eyelids droop. She drew his face to her breasts, crooning and rocking, and lying with her was like lying with a great rustling bird.

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The sun was high when next he opened his eyes, and the chamber empty. He sat up seeing the light stream through the chinks of the wattle screens. He rose shakily, staring down at the gold that ringed his own body, the great pectoral on his breast. This last on impulse he slipped from his neck, holding the shining metal close up to his eyes. The face of a stranger or a girl watched back. He laid the thing aside, frowning deeply, walked a pace at a time to the hut door. He cringed back then, terror rising afresh, for he knew the manner of place to which he had come. After which he needed to piss; this he did, trembling, against the wattle wall. An earthenware water jug stood beside the bed; he drank deeply, slaking his thirst. Then he wrapped the shawl round him and sat head in hands on the edge of the bed and tried to think what he could do.

She came to him at midday, bringing food and drink. She helped him dress, washing him with scented oil, tucking his glory into a cloth of soft white wool. Although he cringed at first, her hands were gentle, so that he all but overcame his fear of her. The fruit and bread he ate hungrily enough; the drink he spat out, expecting the taste of beer, and she laughed and told him it was Midsea wine. His head spun again at that for none of the village had ever tasted such a thing, not even T'Sagro, who was the father of Dareen and who owned fifty goats. He drank again, and the second sip was better, so that he drained the cup and poured himself more, after which his head spun as it had spun when he sniffed the Magic Smoke. Also the wine made him bolder, so that he said, "Why am I here?" These were the first words he had spoken.

She stared at him before she answered. Then she said, "Because you are a God." He frowned at this and asked, "Why am I a God?" and she told him in terms of forthrightness the like of which he had not heard, least of all from a woman. Also she had a trick of speech that seemed to go into his body, hardening it and creating desire. When she had left him, he lay on the bed and thought he would sleep, but her words returned to him till he pulled the cloth aside and stared down at himself wondering if he might be as beautiful as she had said. Then he remembered his father and sister and the manner of their deaths, and wept. Toward nightfall he sat at the hut door and saw far off below the great fall of the hill smoke rise from where perhaps the Horsemen burned another village that had refused its dues, and felt lonelier than ever in his life. Then tiredness came on him strongly, so

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that he lay down once more and slept. She returned by moonlight, flitting like a moth; he woke to the cool length of her pressed at his side, her hands working at his cloth. He did with her as he had done in the dream, entering strongly, making her cry out with pleasure, till she had taken his strength, and he slept like one of the dead.

Later, when she brought his food, he said to her, "What are you called?" and she said in a low voice, "The Reborn." The fear returned at that, but night once more brought peace.

The days passed, merging each into the next; and though he dare not wander far from the hut, he found himself anticipating her visits more keenly than before. Also no fear is wholly self-sustaining; he slept more soundly; color returned to his cheeks. She brought him a polished shield, in which to see his reflection; he took to posing secretly before it, admiring the slender strength of his body, the savage painted eyes that stared back into his own. At such times he grew big with thinking of her and fell to devising new means of pleasuring. Also he wondered greatly at her age, for at some times she seemed old as a hill or the great Gods of the chalk, at others as young and fragile as a child. He thought how easy it would be, one day, to pull the mask away, but always his hand was stayed. He talked now, when she came, with increasing freedom, till one day, greatly daring, he told her his wish that she could always be with him in the hut. She laughed at that, a low, rich sound of joy, and clapped her hands, after which she was constantly at his side and a green-masked priest would come or a girl to bring their food, scratch the doorpost and wait humbly in the sunlight. She talked at great length, of all manner of things, and he to her; he told her of his life and how he had herded sheep and how it was to live in a village and be a peasant's child.

She said, "I know." She was sitting in the hut door; it was evening, the grass and tumbled stones of the hill golden in the slanting light. Goats bleated, on the slopes of the great mound, and the air was very still.

He laid his head in her lap; she stroked him awhile, then pulled back her hand. He sat up, meaning finally to speak of the mask, and she rose, stood arms folded staring out across the hill. After a while she spoke, back turned to him. "Altrin," she said, "do you truly love me?"

He nodded, watching up at her and wondering.

"Then," she said, "I will tell you a story. Once there was a little

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girl, younger than your sister, when you loved her and used to stroke her hair. She was in love too, with a certain God. He came to her in the night, promising many things, so that in her foolishness she wanted to be his Bride."

She half turned; he saw the long muscles of her neck move as she swallowed. "She came to a certain House," she said. "She lay in that House, but there was no God. So she ran away. She became rich and powerful. When she returned, it was with gold and moneysticks, and soldiers of her own. Because of her wealth, her people loved her; because of their love, she gave them a Sign." She nodded at the flanking slope, the sprawling giant with his mighty prick. "While the Sign lay on the hill, her people would be safe," she said. "This the God promised; yet he turned away his face. The Horse Warriors came; the people were killed; the village put to the fire. The servant of the God was killed, there on the hill."

He stared, swallowing in his turn, and the hut seemed very still.

"I was that child," she said. "I am the Reborn."

She stepped away from him. Her voice sounded distant and very cold. "I lay on the hill," she said. "The God took me and was very wonderful. Later, when he grew tired, he returned me to life. It was night, and there were many dead. I was one of them, and yet I crawled away. I crawled for a night and part of a day. I did not know where I was or what had happened to me. I could not see, and there were many flies. I lay by a stream and drank its water. Later I ate berries and leaves. I did not know what had happened to me. One day I decided a thing. I crawled to the stream and looked in, over the bank. The sun was high, so I saw myself clearly."

She shuddered, and her hand went to the mask. "I knew then I must die again," she said. "I had a little knife, but I lacked the strength to put it into myself. I got into the water, thinking I would drown, but the pain of that was too great also. I lay a day and night trying to starve; then I thought my heart might stop for wishing it. But the God refused my life, holding me strongly to the earth. I ate berries and fruit, and my strength returned."

The boy frowned, toying with a necklace she had given him, golden bees, joined by little blue seeds. He reached forward, trying to trap her ankle, but she moved aside. "Can you think what it was like?" she said bitterly. "I had been beautiful; now the Gods had taken my face away."

He flinched a little, then went back to playing with the necklace, frowning up under his brows.

"I thought then, how I could get

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revenge on men," she said. "For men it was who had brought me to this pass. Then one day the God came to me, stirring me just a little. I had forgotten my body, which was as beautiful as ever. Also I couldn't find it in me to hate Him, who is yet the mightiest of Men. I clapped my hands, and he sent another Sign. A fishing bird flew past, dropping a feather on the water. I took it in my hand, seeing how it shone. I knew I could be beautiful again."

She twined her fingers, still staring at the great hill figure. "I made a mask, of grasses the sun had dried," she said. "And a crown of flowers for my hair. I bathed myself in the stream and washed my clothes. I walked to where there had been huts and fields, but they were burned. So I walked to where there were other towns that the Horsemen had not destroyed. Near one of them I saw a girl-child herding geese. 'Leave your flock,' I said, 'and come with me. I am the Reborn, and the God is at my side.'

"Truly He was with me, for she came. We lay together, and she pleasured me. Her fingers were shy, like flowers. In the morning she brought me food. I saw a young man sowing winter wheat. 'I am the Reborn,' I said. 'Come with me, for the God is at my side.'

"So we came to where a village had stood, in a chalk pass next to the sea. The Horse Warriors burned it, but being simple folk, they had not dared my Hall. Nearby they had camped, for as yet they built no towns. I went to them. Thunder followed me, and fire-drakes in the sky. 'Put down your weapons,' I said. 'I am the Reborn, and the God is at my side.' The gold they had stolen I took from them, and cloth from the Yellow Lands to dress my priests. So I came home, in a litter, as of old, with Hornmen before me and my own folk round about. Yet there were none to welcome me. Instead were many ghosts; Cha'Acta, whom I killed, and Magan, whom I killed, and many more. They would not let me be.

"The Horsemen came, asking what tribute the God desired. I made them fetch me skins of fishing birds. The sower of wheat came to me. I asked how he was called. 'Ensil,' he said, 'if it please my Lady.' 'Then you are Cha'Ensil,' I said, 'and a mighty priest. Be faithful, and you shall be mightier.'

"Yet my Hall was empty; he whom once I knew had fled. The wheat sprang green and tall; naught sprang from me but tears. The Horsemen brought me tribute; yet I grieved. Then one day Cha'Ensil came to me again. He told me how he had found the God. I did not believe. He brought me to his House, and there he lay, young

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and beautiful, with no cloth to cover him." She turned suddenly with something like a sob, fell to her knees and pressed her face against his thighs. "Never leave me," she said. "Never go away."

He stroked her lustrous hair, frowning through the doorway of the hut, his eyes remote.

The long summer was passing; mornings were misty and blue, a cold chill crept into the God House of nights. Fagots were brought and stacked, a great fire lit on the hard earth floor of the hut. Some days now she would barely let him rise from the couch. Many times when he was tired she roused him, showing a Magic Thing her body could do; when all else failed, there was the seedsmoke, and the yellow wine. She bathed him, stroking and combing his hair; wild it was and long, brushing his shoulders like silk. Finally these things palled. Winter was on the land; the fields lay sere and brown, cold winds droned through the God House finding every chink in the wattle walls. He brooded, shivering a little, beside the fire; and his decision was reached. Custom had taught him her ways; he broached the subject delicately, as befitted his station.

"Sometimes," he said, "as you will know better than I, even Gods desire to ride abroad and see something of the country they own. I have such a desire; perhaps the God you say is in me is making his wishes felt."

She seemed well pleased. "This is good," she said. "When the people see you, they will be glad, knowing the God is with them. I will ride with you; we must speak to my priest."

In the months that had passed he had rarely seen Cha'Ensil; now he was summoned in haste. He came in state, resplendent in his robes of patterned silk. With him he brought his women, but at that the Reborn demurred. "I will prepare the God," she said. "I and no other, for this is no common beauty."

His hands, which had been calloused, had softened from idleness. She pared and polished his nails, tinting his palms and feet with a dark red stain. His hair she bound with delicate silver leaves, and clothes were brought for him, a cloak of dazzling silk, a tunic with the Corn lord's broidered Sign, boots of soft leather that cased him to the knee. Lastly she gave him a strong white mare, tribute from a chieftain of the Horse People. He sat the creature gingerly enough when the time came, being more used to plough oxen, but she was docile, and his ineptness went unremarked.

So the party set out; Cha'Ensil

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with his priests and soldiers, his Horn and Cymbal men; the Beautiful One on his splendid mount; the Reborn and her favored women in tinkling litters, borne on the backs of sturdy bearers and swaying with the God's gilded plumes. They crossed the Great Heath to the villages of the Plain, curved north and west nearly to the lands of the Marsh Folk, who pay no taxes and do strange things to please their Gods. Everywhere the Horsemen bent the knee, placing hands to their beards in awe, for the Corn Lord was a mighty spirit, his fame reached very far. For Altrin, each day brought further earnest of his strength, and Mata watched with pride to see the young Prince she had made dash happy as a puppy, circling to her call.

Chieftain after chieftain hastened with gifts, and the tribute from the grim towns of the Horsemen was richest of all. The treasure wagons towered the end, while behind them trotted a bleating flock of goats. The eyes of the Beautiful One grew narrow at that, his mind busy, till he summoned Cha'Ensil, more curtly perhaps than one should summon a Chief Priest, to demand an accounting of the God's dues.

Cha'Ensil frowned, holding up the notched sticks on which he carved his marks, but the Prince pushed them scornfully aside. "Everywhere I see villages that are rich," he said. "Both our own folk's towns and those of the Horsemen. Yet we are poor, owning barely five hundred goats and scarce that number of sheep. The Corn Lord brings this prosperity; let his tallies be increased."

Cha'Ensil set his lips into a line. "That is for the Reborn to decide, my Lord," he said gently. "For she is your Mistress, as she is mine."

But Altrin merely laughed, flinging the bone of a game bird into the fire round which they were camped. "Her will is mine," he said, "and so mine is hers. Increase the tallies; I will have a thousand goats by autumn."

Cha'Ensil's face had paled a little; yet he still spoke mildly. "Perhaps," he said, "even Princes may overreach themselves, my Lord. Also, favors freely given may freely be repented."

The boy spat contemptuously. "Priest, I will tell you a riddle," he said. "I have a certain thing about me that is long and hard. With it I defend the favors that are mine, and yet I carry no sword. What do you think it could be?"

The other turned away, shuddering and making a very strange mouth, and for the time nothing more was said.

Later, Altrin had a novel idea. First he loved the Reborn with more than usual fervor, making her

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pant with pleasure; then he lay with his head against her breasts, feeling beneath him the swell of her belly that was so unlike the belly of a girl. "My Lady," he said, "it has come to me that you have been more than generous in your gifts. Yet one thing I lack and desire it most of all."

She laughed, playing with his hair. "The God is greedy," she said. "But that is the way with Gods, and I for one am very glad of it. What do you wish?"

He drew his dangling hair across her breasts and felt her tense. "Cha'Ensil, who is a priest, has many soldiers," he said. "They defend him, running to do his errands, and are at his beck and call. Yet I, in whom the God himself lives, have none. Surely my state should equal his, particularly if I am to ride abroad."

She was still awhile and he thought perhaps she was frowning. Finally she shook her head. "A God needs no soldiers," she said. "His strength is his own, none dares to raise a hand. Soldiers are well enough for lesser folk; besides, Cha'Ensil is my oldest servant. I would not see him wronged."

He sensed that he was on dangerous ground and let the matter rest, but later he withheld himself, on pain of a certain promise. That she gave him finally, when she was tired and her body could no longer resist. He slept curled in her arms, and well content.

The party returned to the high House on the chalk. Once its walls would have been ritually breached, but that was in the old time, long since gone. In every room of the complex fires roared high, fighting the winter chill. The days closed in, howling and bitter; and the snow came, first a powdering then a steadier fall. Deep drifts gathered on the eaves of the God House, blanketing the demons that clung there. But rugs were hung round the walls of the inner chamber, a second fire lit before the wattle screens; and the Reborn and her Lord dined well enough night after night, on wild pig and wine. Sometimes too the priests of the household, or their women, arranged entertainments; at devising these last the Prince showed himself more than usually adroit, and in his Mistress's heart there stirred perhaps the first pang of doubt.

With the spring, Altrin rode out again. He took with him a dozen men of his new bodyguard, later recruiting as many Horsemen into his train. The party rode east, to where fishing villages clustered round a great bight of the sea and the Black Rock begins which none may cross, Divine or otherwise.

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Everywhere folk quailed before the young God with his cold, lovely eyes, and what those eyes happened on, he took. Grain he sent back and goats, and once a girl-child for his Mistress, to be trained in the rites of the God. Two weeks passed, three, before he turned back to the west. The Horsemen he dismissed, paying them with grain, hides and gold from his own supply; later that day he strode back into the hut on the Sacred Mound.

She was waiting for him, in a new gauzy dress of white and green. What expression her face held could not be told, but she was pacing forward and back along the beaten earth floor, her arms folded, her chin sunk on her chest. He hurried to her, taking her arms, but she snatched herself away. "What is this?" he said, half laughing. "Are you not pleased to see me?"

She stamped her slim foot. "Where have you been?" she said. "What are you thinking of? I cried for you for a week. Then I was angry, then I cried for you again. Now — I don't care if you've come back or not."

A bowl and cup stood on an inlaid table, part of his winter spoil. He poured wine for himself, drank and wiped his mouth. "I sent you a pretty child to play with," he said. "Wasn't that enough?"

"And I sent her back," she said. "I didn't want her. What use are girls to me now? It was you I wanted. *Oh*..."

He flung the wine away, angrily. "You tell me I am a God," he said. "I wear a God's clothes, live in a God's house. Yet I must answer like a ploughboy for everything I do."

"Not a ploughboy," she said, "a sheepherder. A peasant you were, a peasant you remain. *Ohh*..." He had turned on his heel; and she was clinging to him with desperate strength. "I wanted you," she said. "I wanted you, I was so lonely. I wanted to die again. I didn't mean what I said, please don't go away. Do what you choose, but please don't go away..."

He stood frowning down, sensing his power. As ever, her nearness roused him; yet obscurely there was the need to hurt. His fingers curled on the edge of the brilliant mask, for an instant it seemed he would tear the thing aside, then he relaxed. "Go to our chamber," he said coldly. "Make yourself ready; perhaps, if my greeting is more fitting, I shall come to you."

Cha'Ensil, stepping to the doorway of the hut, heard the words and the sobs that answered them. He stood still a moment, face impassive, then turned, walking swiftly back the way he had come.

Some days afterward the hilltop began to bustle with activity. A new

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Hall was rising, below the God House and some forty paces distant, for the Reborn had decreed the older structure too chilly to serve another winter. Also extra accommodation was needed for the many hopefuls flocking to join the priesthood. The fame of the God was spreading; all were anxious to share his good fortune. The Prince himself took a keen interest in the newcomers, selecting (or so it seemed) the comeliest virgins and the least prepossessing men, but Cha'Ensil held himself aloof from the entire affair. Later the Beautiful One rode north, and again. An extra granary was built, a new range of stables, and still the tribute wagons trundled down to the great gap in the chalk. The Horsemen bore hard upon the land, and wherever they rode, there also went the ensigns of the God. Smoke rose from a score of burning villages, and at last it was time, high time, to cry enough.

Cha'Ensil, seeking an audience with the Prince, found him in the New Hall, where he was accustomed to take his ease. He lay on a divan draped with yellow silk, a wine jug at his elbow and a cup. He greeted Cha'Ensil casually enough, waving him to a seat with a hand that flashed with gold. "Well, priest," he said, "say what you have to quickly, and be gone. My Mistress waits, and tonight the strength of the God is more than usually in me. I shall take her several times."

The priest swallowed but sat as he was bidden, gathering his robes about him. "My Prince," he began reasonably enough, "I, who raised you to your estate, have every right to counsel you. We live, as you know full well, by the good will of the Horsemen. They fear the God, but they are children, and greed may outrun fear. This show of magnificence you seem so set on will end in ruin, for you, and for us all."

The Prince drained the cup at a gulp and poured another. "This show, which is no more than my due, makes you uneasy," he said. "You lie jealous in your bed, and for more reasons than the ones you state. Now hear me. My strength may or may not come from the God; personally I think it does, but that is beside the point. Behind me stands One whose will is not lightly crossed; while I satisfy her, and satisfy her I think I do, your power is ended. Now leave me. Whine to your women, if you must; I am easily tired by foolishness."

Cha'Ensil rose, his face white with rage. "Shepherd boy," he said, "I saved you for my lady. For her sake have I borne with you; now I tell you this. I will not see her and her House destroyed. Take warning —"

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He stopped, abruptly, for Altrin had also risen to his feet, swaying a little from the wine. A cloak, richly embroidered, hung from his shoulders; save for a little cloth, he was otherwise naked. "And I tell you this, sower of winter wheat," he said. "That when the strength goes from me, I may fall. But that is hardly likely yet." He squeezed, insultingly, the great thrusting at his groin, then snatched at his hip. "Priest," he jeered, "will you see the power of the God?"

But the other, mouth working, had blundered from the chamber. Behind him as he hurried away rose the mocking laughter of the Beautiful One.

The horse drummed across the Heath, raising behind it a thin plume of whitish dust. Its rider, cloaked and masked, carried a great Staff of Power. He crouched low in the saddle, driving his heels at the beast's sides to urge it to even greater speed. While the fury gripped him, Cha'Ensil made good time; later he slowed the weary animal to a walk. Midday found him clear of the Great Heath; at dusk he presented himself at the gates of a city of the Horsemen, a square, spike-walled fortress set above rolling woodland on a spur of chalk. There he instituted certain enquiries; while his status, and the gold he bore, secured him lodging for the night together with other services dearer to his heart. For the Chief Priest had by no means wasted his opportunities since taking service with the God of the great chalk pass. The morning brought answers to his questions. More gold changed hands, and Cha'Ensil rode north again, on a mount sounder in wind than the one on which he had arrived. Halfway through the day he bespoke a wagon train; the drivers waved him on, pointing with their whips. At nightfall, out in the vastness of the Great Plain, he reached his destination; the capital of the Horsemen's southern kingdom, a place resplendent with watchtowers and granaries, barracks and Royal courts.

Here the power of the Corn Lord was less directly felt. Cha'Ensil fumed at the gates an hour or more before his purse, if not his Master, secured admission. He made his way through rutted earth streets to the house of a Midsea merchant, a trader who for his unique services was tolerated even by the Horsemen. Once more, gold secured admission, and a slave with a torch conducted him to the chamber of his choice. A heavy door was unbolted, chains clinked back, and the priest stepped forward, wrinkling his nose at the odor that assailed him. To either side in the gloom stretched filthy

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straw pallets. All were occupied, some by women, some by young boys. The slave grunted, gesturing with the torch, and the other called, sharply.

Nothing.

Cha'Ensil spoke again, and a voice answered sullenly from the farther shadows. It said, "What do you want with me?"

He took the torch, stepped forward and stared. Dull eyes, black-shadowed, watched up from a pallid face. The girl's hair sprawled lank on the straw; over her was thrown a ragged blanket. Cha'Ensil raised his brows, speaking gently; for answer she spat, turning her face from the glare.

The priest stooped, mouth puckered with distaste. Beneath the blanket she was naked; he searched her body swiftly for the signs of a certain disease. There were none, and he sat back on his heels with a sigh. "Rise, and find youself a cloth," he said. "I am your friend, and knew your father well. I have come to take you away from this place, back to your home."

Cha'Ensil returned to the God House alone some few days later, and hastened to make obeisance to his Mistress, but it seemed his absence had not been too much noticed. He served the Reborn well in the weeks that followed and was unfailing in his courtesy to Altrin when chance placed the Beautiful One in his path, for his heart was more at rest.

Two months passed, and a third; the green of summer was changing to flaunting gold when he once more rode from the Sacred Mound. He headed south, to a village well enough known to him. Here, on a promontory overlooking the sparkling sweep of the sea, stood just such a Hall as the one he had quitted. He presented himself at the stockade and was courteously received. Later he was conducted by tortuous paths to a tiny bay, closed on either side by headlands of tumbled rock. A dozen children played in the crash and surge of the water, watched over by a priest and a seamed-faced woman who was their instructress in the Mysteries. A purse changed hands, and the woman called, shrilly.

Cha'Ensil peered, shading his eyes. A lithe, brown-skinned girl waded from the water; she stood before him boldly, wearing neither cloth nor band, returning his scrutiny with a slow smile. He spoke, uncertainly; for answer she knelt before him, lowering her head as the ritual dictates.

He nodded, well pleased. "You have worked excellently, Cha'Ilgo," he said. "The God defend and prosper you." Then to the woman, "See she is dressed and readied for a journey. I leave inside the hour."

That day a new priestess arrived

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at the Hall of the Reborn, and Cha'Ensil, whose office it was, conducted her to the Presence with pride. Altrin, seated grandly to one side, did not speak; but his eyes followed the girl as she moved through the forms of greeting; and Cha'Ensil, watching sidelong, saw his brows furrow into a frown.

The opportunity for which the Chief Priest had waited was not long in coming. He was sent for, brusquely enough; a few minutes later, his face composed, he stooped into the presence of Altrin.

The Beautiful One, it seemed, was more than a little drunk. He eyed Cha'Ensil balefully before he spoke; then he said roughly, "Who is she, husbandman?"

Cha'Ensil smiled soothingly. "To whom," he said, "does my Lord refer?"

The other swore, reaching for the wine bowl. Its contents spilled; the Chief Priest hastened to assist him. The cup was recharged; Altrin sat back and belched. He said again, "Who is she?"

Cha'Ensil smiled once more. "Some child of a chalk hill farmer," he said. "An apt pupil, as I have been told; she will no doubt prove an asset to the House."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Dareen," said the Chief Priest steadily. "The daughter of T'Sagro. Your father's neighbor, Prince."

The other stared. He said huskily, "How can this be?"

"I found her, in a certain place," said Cha'Ensil. "I freed her, thinking it would be your will." He extended his arms. "The enmity between us is ended," he said. "Let her happiness be my peace gift to you, Lord."

Altrin rose, his brows contracted to a scowl. He said, "Bring her to me."

Cha'Ensil lowered his eyes. "Sir, it is hardly wise..."

"Bring her...!"

The other bowed. He said, "It shall be as my Lord desires."

The night was windy; the growing complex of wooden buildings groaned and shifted, alive with creaks and rustlings. Torches burned in sconces; by their light the pair negotiated a corridor hewn partly from the chalk, tapped at a door. A muffled answer; and the Chief Priest raised the latch, propelling the girl gently forward. He said, "My Lord, the priestess Dareen." He closed the door, waited a moment head cocked, then padded softly away.

She faced him across the room. She said in a low voice, "Why did you send for me?"

He moved forward, seemingly dazed. He said, "Dareen?" He reached to part the cloak she wore, and she knocked his arm away.

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She said furiously, *"Don't touch me."*

He flushed at that, the wine buzzing in his brain. He said thickly, "I touch who I please. I command who I please. I am the God."

She stared, open-mouthed; then she began to laugh. "You?" she said. "You, a God? Who herded sheep on the hillside, and dared not lift eyes to me in the street? Now...a God...forgive me, my Lord Sheep-drover. This is too sudden..."

He glared at her. He said, "I did not choose to raise my eyes to you. You were a child."

She snarled at him, *"You did not choose..."* She swallowed, clenching her fists. "Day after day I walked to where you lay," she said. "And day after day you watched me, like a silly little boy, and played with yourself in the grass because you were afraid. I humbled myself, in sight of you, because I wanted you; I wanted you to come and take me. But you never came. You never came because you dared not. Now leave me in peace. You are no man for me."

He grabbed the cloak, wrenched. Beneath, she wore the green and gold of a priestess. Her waist was cinched by a glittering belt; her breasts jutted boldly at the thin cloth of her tunic. He gripped her, and she swung her hand flat-palmed. The slap rang in the little chamber; he doubled his fist, eyes swimming, and she staggered. Silence fell; in the quiet she probed at a wobbling tooth, rubbed her lips, stared at the smudge of red on the back of her hand. Then her bruished mouth smiled. "I see," she said. "Now I suppose you will beat me. Perhaps you will kill me. How very brave that would be." She circled, staring. "Now you are a God," she said. "What happened to me, when you became a God? And Tamlin, and Sirri, and Merri, and all the others? Do you know?" Her eyes blazed at him. "Tamlin died on a treadmill," she said. "Sirri was sold to the King of the Horsemen, who beat her till he broke her back. Merri has the sickness the Midsea people bring. I went to a whorehouse, while a certain God, whose name we will not speak, dressed in silk and called himself a man." She wiped her mouth again. "Well, go on," she said. "Beat me, or call your priests to do it for you. Then you can lie in peace, with your old fat woman who doesn't have a face —"

She got no further. His hands went to her throat; she tore an arm free, struck at him again. A wrestling; then her mouth was on his. She was groping for him, pulling and wrenching at his cloth.

Much later, when all was over, he began to cry. She cradled him then in the dark, pressing his

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mouth to her breast, calling him by a name his mother used when he was a tiny child.

He woke heavy with sleep, and she had rolled from him. He groped for her, needing her warmth after the many years. She nuzzled him, smiling and stroking, and the door of the chamber swung slowly inward.

He sat up, appalled. He saw the mask of glittering blue, the Chief Priest at her side. He sprang forward with a shout, but he was too late. The door banged shut; he wrenched it back, but the corridor beyond was empty. The Reborn and her Minister were gone.

The light grew, across the Heath. Above him the high hill and its buildings lay deserted, and a drizzle was falling, drifting from the dull void of the sky.

He moved with a desperate urgency, stooping low, fingers clutched round the wrist of the frightened girl. The stockade was before him, and the high lashed gates. He climbed, scrambling, reached back to her. Her skirt tore; she landed beside him with a thud, glared back and up. He took her wrist again, slithering on the steep grass of the ditch, pushing aside the soaked branches of trees.

From a chamber on the Mound, the Reborn stared down. No quiver, no movement betrayed her breathing; beside her, Cha'Ensil's face was set like stone. The fugitives vanished, reappeared on the farther slope. The woman stiffened, and the priest turned to her. He said, "My Lady?"

She turned away, hands to the feathered mask. She said, "He must come back, Cha'Ensil."

He waited, and her shoulders shook. He said gently, "And if he will not?"

The muffled words seemed dragged from her. She said. "Then none will sit beside me. None must know our secrets, priest. Or what power we have, is gone..." She waited then, till the latch clicked, the sound of his footsteps died. She dropped to her knees, crept to the corner of the little room. She pushed the bird mask from her and began to sob.

Beside the great Mound the brook ran swift and silent between fern-hung banks. A fallen tree spanned it, stark in the early light. He crossed awkwardly, turned back to the girl. Sweat was on his face; he stared up at the Mound, plunged on again. Beyond the brook grew clumps of waist-high grass. He staggered between them, brown bog water about his calves. There was a swell of rising ground; he fell to his knees, the girl beside him, hung his head and panted.

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A voice said quietly, "Where to now, my Lord?"

He raised his face, slowly. Round him the semicircle of figures stood grey against the sky. A few paces beyond, masked and cloaked, was the priest. The Beautiful One glared, licking his mouth, and raised a shaking finger. "Eldron, Melgro, Baath," he said. "You are my men. Save me from treachery..."

The man called Eldron stepped forward, stood looking down. "Wake the thunder, Prince," he muttered. He whirled the heavy club he carried, struck. The Prince collapsed, setting up a hoarse bawling.

Melgro wiped his face. "Bow the trees down, Lord," he said, and struck in turn.

Baath, smiling, drew a heavy-bladed knife. "Rouse the lightning, ploughboy," he said, "and I will call you God." He drove with the blade, and the little group closed in, hacking in silence. Bright drops flew, spattering the rough grey grass; the bawls changed to a high-pitched keening that was cut off in its turn. The body rolled a little way, back to the water, shook, and was still.

The girl crouched where she had fallen, unmoving. As the priest approached, she raised a face that was chalk-white beneath its tan. "Why, priest?" she said, small-voiced. "Why?"

Cha'Ensil stooped above her, drawing a little dagger from his belt. He said, "I loved him too." He pulled her head back quickly, and used the knife.

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Mr. Bishop's last story here was "The White Otters of Childhood," July 1973, and he is currently working on a novel, A FUNERAL FOR THE EYES OF FIRE, to be published by Ballantine. This new story is about a veteran of the war in Southeast Asia, who has returned home to a new kind of fear.

The Tigers of Hysteria Feed Only On Themselves

by MICHAEL BISHOP

Trapper's farm lay to the east of the foothills that rose behind the red gas pumps and the corrugated tin roof of the general store in Bay Hamlet, two miles down the road. The closest genuine towns were Harriston and Bladed Oak.

On the morning that his forty-five-year-old stepson was coming back from the interminable Asian war, Trapper, a thin man with a sharp nose and a balding weaselish head, stood in the gravel driveway in front of his tool shop (a darkness cluttered with rusted barrels, antlers from long-ago hunts, miscellaneous automobile parts, and crumpled girlie calendars commissioned by harvesting-machine manufacturers and waited for the son of his dead wife to appear in a billow of moving grime on the hedged-in road that went by his old clapboard farmhouse.

Trapper kicked at the gravel with his boot.

An hour went by.

Then the faint churning noise of heavy tires told the lean old man that his stepson had turned the corner by the Primitive Baptist church, a good way to the east. Looking down the scraggly line of the hedge, Trapper saw the moving cloud that both concealed and ratified the existence of the car.

A moment later the car bounced into the driveway in front of the tool shop and swayed a little in the heat, like a B-52 just brought down on a jungle air strip for an emergency stopover.

"Hello," a voice said. "Hello, Trapper."

The old man's stepson gave the impression that he had appeared not from the interior of the car but rather by parachute from the

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cloudless, white sky. He wore mufti but looked like a soldier. His hair bristled and his lined but solid jowls were tan. Blue eyes burned out of his soldierly face, and he hugged the lean old farmer who was his stepfather with intimidating affection. He had been a first sergeant in the army. Three days ago his retirement had gone through.

"Hello, Sonny," Trapper said.

"You don't look a bit different," Sonny said. "Maybe skinnier. Hey, I want you to meet Joe Luc!"

Trapper looked back at the silver automobile and saw an Asian youth who appeared to be sixteen or seventeen coming around the hood with a grim uncommunicative expression in his eyes. Slender and supple, the Asian youth stopped six feet away from the embracing father and son and simply stared.

"I'm trying to adopt him, Trapper. Hell of a job getting him into the States at all — but people over there owe me plenty, some of 'em colonels and generals, too. Until we get things completely straightened out, I'm calling him Joe Luc."

The white sun beat down. The smell of some kind of pesticide drifted in to them from the cotton fields behind the tool shop.

"He looks a bit old for adoptin'," Trapper said.

Joe Luc came around the bumper and leaned against the driver's door. He put his hands in his trouser pockets. "I *am* too old for adoption, Mr. Trapper." Trapper's last name was Catlaw. "I am twenty-one years when it is August."

Sonny moved his stepfather toward the youth. "Last year when I first started trying to get out of that hellhole, he told me, 'I am twenty-one years when it is August.' He doesn't know what years are, he tells that to everybody. Don't you, Joe Luc?"

Trapper Catlaw and Joe Luc stood face to face. They were the same height. At last the old man put out his hand and the Asian youth took it. The smell of the pesticide in the cotton fields burned the nostrils of all three of them.

"I know what years are," Trapper said. "Glad to meet you."

The three of them ate in the kitchen, at the wooden table that Sonny's mother had always kept covered with sweetbreads, fried pies, and open plates of fresh vegetables, usually in vinegar.

Trapper served Sonny and Joe Luc pork chops left over from the previous day and iced tea made of unsoftened farm water. (The water always made Sonny think of tin ladles and broken pumps.) Joe Luc ate and drank with casual politeness, apparently unoffended

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by the bad water. After the meal Trapper scraped the chop bones off the plates and left the dishes in the sink.

That evening they watched the color television set in the living room. They conversed very little, though Sonny told two different war stories three times apiece and gesticulated as if he were commanding a platoon of intractable goldbricks. At the same time they watched the CBS news, with Roger Mudd substituting for Walter Cronkite. Then they watched an early-evening quiz program, Joe Luc answering some of the questions. Later they watched *Mannix*.

After that, Trapper got up and walked across the hardwood flooring on his game leg. He changed the channel. "There's a Shoot-Em-Up-Tony I want to see." Trapper called westerns Shoot-Em-Up-Tonys. The Shoot-Em-Up-Tony was in black and white.

"Oh, Trapper," Sonny said. "You don't want to watch that shit."

"What do you want to see, knothead?" Limned in the television's fuzzy light, Trapper's narrow head looked back over his narrower shoulder.

"Not this. They're always the same. You know how it's going to come out, Trapper; you've probably already seen it."

"We'll watch the Shoot-Em-Up-Tony," Joe Luc said.

In the dim room-lit only by the television set they watched the Shoot-Em-Up-Tony.

When the second commercial break interrupted the movie, Sonny got up and went into the bedroom where he had slept as a boy. Trapper saw him close the door. He knew that a feather bed awaited Sonny. On the wall in that room hung the pelt of some anonymous animal, time-bitten and miserably stiff.

A truck went by on the road outside the house. It sounded like the advance vehicle in an army convoy, growling through the night on a rutted alien highway.

During the night Trapper sat up in his bed and listened to the voices that drifted across the living room from the bedroom opposite his own — Sonny's room. What time was it? Trapper himself got up early but never at two or three in the morning. Still, it sounded as if Sonny and Joe Luc were up and arguing, exchanging insults in his stepson's cramped "hunters' den." Sonny had called it that as a boy. And now, even though the door to the hunters' den must be closed, the immoderately inflected voices of Sonny and Joe Luc carried to Trapper Catlaw in the dark and made him cock his narrow head

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uneasily. Uneasily, he sought to learn the substance of their argument.

To no avail. The darkness was thick, the voices uncooperatively faint and foreign.

Having listened for nearly fifteen minutes, Trapper decided that his two house guests were berating each other in the Asian youth's own language. It wasn't good American, he knew that. An Oriental tongue: high-pitched, nervous, full of subtle whines and meaningless yammerings. The darkness in the living room absorbed most of it. Did any of it have anything to do with him? Did it embody a nebulous threat of some kind?

Trapper was afraid to get out of bed. He pulled himself up against his carven headboard and looked toward the open door of his room. It was toward the end of June, and hot. Ordinarily the lean old man did not sweat very much, but now he felt patches of salty coolness under the arms of his ribbed undershirt and a fever behind his ears. He waited.

A bump. A muffled shout. A sudden wash of pale light on the hardwood floor in the living room. And after these things, the abrupt slamming of a door.

Trapper did not go back to sleep that night.

In the morning when he put the brown-rimmed fried eggs with unbroken yolks in front of Sonny and Joe Luc, he noticed that Sonny had a long crimson-lipped cut over his left eye. The cut had not been tended to, and there were flakes of dried blood in his stepson's eyebrow, a brownish smear on his temple, and a blue swelling of the left lid. Joe Luc ate with his head down and appeared trim, calculating, and exotically clean-cut in a white shirt.

"What happened to that eye?" Trapper asked, buttering a piece of toast.

"Nothing happened to it," Sonny said vehemently. "What's wrong with it? Do you see anything wrong with it?"

"It's blooded up pretty good."

"Yes," Joe Luc agreed. "It is."

"You're both of you out of your heads. Probably the heat. You never could think straight in the summer, Trapper."

"Thought good enough to raise you up. Know a blooded eye when I see it."

"It ain't *blooded*, Trapper!"

Joe Luc put his fork beside his plate. He began a strange speech in which he employed words that Trapper didn't understand. "In the mountains in my country live a people who refuse to acknowledge their pain when they have suffered a hurt from themselves or from

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others. They pretend nothing has happened. They put their faith in the hysteria of their community. Out of their number, they believe, there will come an avenger who will mold the frustration, anger, self-righteousness, and madness of their people into a beast-shape. The beast-shape rages at the cause of their silently borne hurt — rages and destroys, Mr. Trapper. These mountain people fear only one thing: that the creature shaped out of their hysteria will turn upon them." Joe Luc wiped up the viscous egg yolk on his plate with a crust of bread. "They fear the beast-avenger will forget who ought to be the object of its recompense."

It was just like a preacher. "If I was those people," Trapper said, "I'd go on a hunt."

Sonny pushed his chair back violently and knocked his china plate to the floor, where it rattled but did not break. "Listen, Joe Luc!" he shouted. "Do you want me to adopt you or not? Shut up that kind of claptrap!"

"For adoption," Joe Luc said, "I am now too old."

The three men looked at one another in bewilderment, knowledge, and awe. Sonny was clenching his fists, hyperventilating. In a matter of minutes, even as they faced one another in the bright sun-streaked kitchen, Sonny's left eye closed and somehow glued itself shut. He didn't seem to notice.

Trapper Catlaw cleaned up the mess, dumped it into the sink with the previous night's dishes, and went out to his tool shop where a neighbor from up the road waited patiently for him to begin repairs on his '62 John Deare tractor. The man's name was Lester Spurgeon.

Before noon the sky clouded up. Thunder sounded in the east, like the resonances of distant artillery.

It was the middle of July.

Almost every night Trapper could hear arguments from Sonny's hunters' den: high-pitched bickering that always ended in the abrupt explosion of a slammed door. He could not bring himself to get out of bed to see what Sonny and Joe Luc could be arguing about. It was none of his business — except that they ought to have more sense than to rattle the brass bedposts and to slam doors at two in the morning, when even the noises of the crickets in the grass had begun to diminish to a drowsy thrumming.

Sonny came to breakfast with no more wounds — even though the midnight shouting and thumping from his hunters' den had grown even more violent (while remaining unfathomable to Trapper) than it had been on that first dim occasion. Sonny's left eye, however, was now just a swollen and gooey depression;

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his eyebrow had somehow dipped down toward this vileness and interthreaded itself with the mucus that had replaced his eye.

Despite this, none of them talked about the eye any more.

And Sonny, Trapper observed, moved just as brusquely, talked just as boisterously, and engaged in as much daylight horseplay as he had when both brilliant blue eyes had burned in his battle-etched, soldier's face. Joe Luc behaved as he had from the beginning, too — with an Oriental formality that sometimes belied the fact that he knew exactly what he wanted and needed no one but his anciently youthful self to obtain it. He told no more stories about the primitive mountain folk and their beast-avengers shaped from their communal fear, but Trapper did not miss hearing these stories.

Surprisingly, neither Sonny nor Joe Luc suffered noticeably from the lack of sleep occasioned by their midnight altercations — but then they didn't work in the fields, anyway. They stayed in the house all day, drinking Coca Colas, watching quiz programs, and playing checkers, at which Joe Luc excelled. With the exception of that first morning in the kitchen the two of them got along splendidly while the sun was up and while Trapper was around to see them. Only at night did they savagely argue.

But at 2:14 a.m. on July 31, Trapper awoke with a start to realize that he had heard nothing — absolutely nothing — from Sonny's hunters' den across the moonlit buffer zone of the living room. Not a sound, not so much as a whisper. The house pulsed with the silence, and in the vegetable garden beyond Trapper's window the very earth hummed with the latent energy of a thousand buried seeds. Why weren't they at it? Didn't they know what time it was? For the rest of that night Trapper could not sleep, could not keep from twisting the hem of his ribbed undershirt in his thin fingers — could only drowse off and dream, awaken and start, drowse off again, dream, awaken, and wait for morning.

When morning came Trapper went into the kitchen. Only Joe Luc was there to greet him.

"Where's Sonny?"

"Still in bed, I must suppose."

They ate their fried eggs in silence.

After breakfast Joe Luc went into the living room and turned on the *Today* show on the big color set. Trapper could hear Frank Blair reporting the news as he exited through the back porch off the kitchen, slammed the screen door, and went down the steps toward the barn and the chicken houses.

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As he passed the tool shop, he knew, at once that something was wrong in the chicken houses. They lay beyond the barn, and he had to pass through the barn's hay-strewn carriage area to get there — but he could already tell that when he arrived he would stumble upon the sordid aftermath of an unpleasantness.

He did.

In the chicken pens he saw the corpses of all the biddies, roosters, and fledglings that he possessed. Nowhere did he see signs of forced entry into the coop: no broken gates, no holes clawed beneath the chicken wire, no knocked-askew fence posts. Only dead fowls.

Severed, eyeless heads. Skinned, ineptly plucked torsos. Feathers plastered against the coop's weather-beaten facade, stuck there by the thin mortar of the chickens' own blood. Disembodied feet. Several broken eggs, their contents spilled yellowly over the general mess. Bits of broken shells adhering in those places where the feathers didn't. The sick, rancid smell of bird flesh.

It was a small massacre. The poor creatures had had nowhere to flee, no protector in view.

"I didn't hear none of it," Trapper Catlaw said aloud. "There warn't none of it that I heard."

What did these chickens do to deserve what they got here? he wondered. Whatever or whoever had killed them had not even been hungry enough to eat the flesh, not even desperate enough for cash to carry off a few of the corpses. What did it all mean?

In the barn a horse whinnied and stamped in belated panic, and Trapper had the incongruous thought that it had been a long time since the United States Army had retired its cavalry horses. He wondered how many of these pensioned-off animals were still alive.

Then he went back to the house. Sonny was awake. He and Joe Luc were playing checkers in front of the television set. Trapper stood over the board for a few minutes. He noticed that one of Sonny's fingernails was broken off all the way to the quick, that the crimson plush of this wound throbbed with a hypnotizing animal vibrancy. He didn't say anything about the chickens.

As August progressed, the number of gratuitous slaughters of livestock in the Bay Hamlet area became a source of endless speculation among Trapper Catlaw's neighbors. Trapper himself had already lost, in addition to his poultry, an Angus bull and six heifers that he kept in the land to the north of the cotton fields. None of the meat had been eaten.

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Lester Spurgeon told Trapper that both his bluetick hounds, dogs valued at more than five-hundred dollars apiece, had been disemboweled in the kennel behind Lester's house, their guts looped through the chain-link fence and scattered right up to the porch beneath the room where he and Mrs. Spurgeon slept. Neither of them had heard anything, not even the first bugle note of their hounds' instinctive baying. As in all the other merciless killings, no tracks led up to or away from the place of slaughter. The murderer — be it ghost, man, or beast-avenger — left no evidence in its wake but the bodies of the slain; it would not be held accountable.

Lester Spurgeon said, "What I want to know is, Are *people* safe from this whatever we've got here? And how long will it go on? Can you answer me that, Trapper?"

Trapper was a farmer and a mechanic; he couldn't answer Lester Spurgeon that.

In the Bay Hamlet general store he heard the gossip, the rumors, the unsubstantiated reports, the lies, the half-truths, the truth itself. Lucas March, from this side of Cherry Creek, was out a team of matched Percherons. Seabright Johns knew of an uplands farmer who had lost an entire herd of white-faced cattle in the space of two nights. A woman, somebody's hysterical wife, said that the sheriff in Harriston had come upon the mutilated bodies of three "nigger boys" in a roadside ditch. That almost answered Lester Spurgeon's question about the status of people with this killer-thing — almost. For if "nigger boys" could go under, how long would it be before a genuine human being succumbed to the fangs, the blade, the psychic weaponry, of this unnamable menace? Did one even dare credit the story of the hysterical woman from Harriston?

Nehi carbonated fruit drinks were passed around in front of the soft-drink cooler, and the talk continued.

Trapper Catlaw went home to the clapboard house where Sonny and Joe Luc played their interminable games of checkers; where they engaged in hearty, one-sided badinage (Sonny doing most of the talking, squinting with his good eye at the board); and where they comported themselves pretty much as would political adversaries who respect each other's integrity (at least superficially), Sonny clapping Joe Luc on the shoulder, the Asian youth smiling his knowing and tolerant smile.

"Crown me! Another king, goddamn it!"

That was what Sonny shouted as Trapper came into the living room from the kitchen. He watched

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another move, this one by the Oriental.

"Give me the crown also, please," Joe Luc said.

"Hello, Trapper. Sit down. What's the word at Bay Hamlet? They going to catch this thing? I'm doing pretty good here. Don't you fret about the outcome when Joe Luc and me sit down at the checker table. Did you check the mail? I'm wondering if those adoption papers aren't finally going to come through."

"Warn't no mail, Sonny. No 'doption papers." Trapper did not sit down. Why did they play checkers day in and day out when the countryside lay stricken, paralyzed, damn-near inert under the protracted spell of this senseless blood curse? The heat was sapping his energy reserves. Lately Trapper found that he had begun to pay for the very sunlight with the coin of his own sweat. How could he keep feeding these two; watching their alternate "crown me's," worrying about the pool of mucus in Sonny's left eye?

"I am always too old for such papers, anyway," Joe Luc said. He smiled at Trapper. His front teeth were like miniature ivory scimitars, bright with saliva. After Sonny moved, he moved.

Then they began a new game.

That night Trapper did not undress. In his oil-grimed khaki trousers and his soiled work shirt he got in bed and pulled the sheet up to his chin. Only his shoes had he bothered to take off.

A bit of light came into his room from the television set that Sonny and Joe Luc were still watching. They were in chairs back from the door; Trapper couldn't see them — not until one of them got up and walked across the hardwood floor to turn the set off, moving in his own shadow. From the sound of the footfalls Trapper guessed that it was Sonny. A silhouette leaned into the frame of the stuttering picture and blanked it out right at the end of *The Star-Spangled Banner:* "O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave / O'er the land of the free and the home of the —"

—Click!

The house was dark. Floor boardings creaked as Sonny and Joe Luc went off to their respective beds. Trapper scarcely breathed. His heart felt like it was in the breast pocket of his work shirt. Crickets sang anthems to one another in the midnight grasses outside his window.

Trapper got out of bed and walked on his lame leg to the door. He stood there in the darkness for a long time, a little back from the left-hand frame. No sound disturbed his vigil, no faint, faint

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breathing deafened him to his own implacable heartbeat. At last his eyes had adjusted sufficiently to the living room's suffusion of midnight grey for him to see that Sonny's door was open.

Sonny almost never left his room open at night. As a boy he had been fastidious about closing out the world — his brothers, sisters, parents, everyone — whenever he went to bed. Sometimes he had closed it out right after supper. But now the door to the hunters' den stood not only ajar but recklessly and nakedly open.

Why?

Then Trapper saw a lithe and muscular form, a sleek shadow among shadows, slip from the open door and glide through the moonlit dapples on the hardwood toward the front porch: an animal shape. A beautiful commingling of intelligence and brute power. Then the dapples on the floor were empty, and the hardwood gleamed in the darkness as if it had been newly varnished.

Trapper walked into the living room in his stocking feet, his pulse sounding like small-arms fire bursting relentlessly against his eardrums, reverberating in his bones.

He was afraid to check Sonny's bed. He didn't check it. He opened the screen door to the closed-in porch and felt the cold of the concrete seep through his threadbare socks to the soles of his feet.

Out here the crickets set up a racket like a thousand telegraph boards operating in unison.

The porch swing where he and Sonny's mother had passed most of their evenings before the advent of television was rocking back and forth in the August stillness, its tether-chains creaking. Nothing else stirred, nothing else hinted at life.

Trapper limped through the porch, stumped down the steps, and hitched along the narrow walkway between his dead wife's chrysanthemums and snapdragons to the gravel road. In the middle of the road he looked eastward in the direction of the Primitive Baptist church. The moonlight didn't permit him to see much but the hedges on either side of the road and a whitish glow above a faraway stand of cottonwoods. The smell of pesticides was so acrid and dense that he wondered if the sound of the crickets wasn't actually the droning of a squadron of crop dusters, flying in formation.

But he sensed nothing else at all, no alien presences.

He went back to the house and sat down in the porch swing. For over an hour he rocked in it, looking at the hedge that bordered the road. He didn't know whether he was waiting for Sonny or not. At

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the end of a time that he made no attempt to measure he got out of the swing and went back to the road. He looked eastward again.

Now he saw fires toward the northeast and a cancerous burning above the sharecropper's lot beyond which the Baptist church stood. The sky was red-black; the very air reeked of kerosene and something suspiciously like the outlawed DDT. In this frightening night-glow, in this mysterious stench, Trapper Catlaw stood in the gravel in front of his house and waited for a sign.

A pickup truck came down the road toward him out of the lurid blaze of the Primitive Baptist church. The headlights bored into him like thumbscrews positioned just above his eyes. When it had come abreast of him, the pickup halted in a spray of gravel.

Seabright Johns leaned out of the passenger's window: "Lester Spurgeon's wife's been killed, Trapper. Torn in a hundred pieces right outside the parsonage. God, her body's all over! She was helpin' late with tomorrow's covered-dish dinner and was on her way home. Nobody in the parsonage heard nothing. Lester found her down the road a ways after he phoned the parsonage and found out she'd been gone from there almost an hour without making it home. He didn't know it was her at first. He damn-near ran over her with his pickup — parts of her, anyways."

There were two other men in the cab with Seabright; neither of them was Lester. It appeared that Seabright would continue his breathless narrative until daybreak if his companions let him.

Distractedly, Trapper asked, "What're them fires?"

"We're burnin' down all the old empty sharecroppers' huts," the driver of the truck said. "The killer's probably holed up in one of them. He's been hauntin' Bay Hamlet for nearly three weeks. We're gonna burn him out."

"What happened to the church?"

"That was an accident," Seabright said. "There're some other fellers up there, too. They spilled kerosene and somebody's cigarette got loose. The parsonage'll be completely et up by morning." He sounded jubilant. "But they's plenty of fuel oil left and they're goin' toward Cherry Creek with it, them other fellers. We're goin' over by the Hamlet and up in the foothills."

"You wanna come?" the man in the middle said.

"No. You can't burn up the whole countryside."

"Just the empty sharecroppers' huts," the driver reiterated. "So we can flush the bastard out — roast the son of a bitch!"

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"It won't work," Trapper said.

The men in the pickup laughed, and the truck roared away from him, spitting rocks. Its taillights glowed like embers as it headed for the sharecropper's hovel on the old Hutchinson place. When it was gone Trapper could hear the telegraphy of insects again.

He went back to the porch swing and, rocking gently, stayed in it all night. He imagined that the homes of his friends lay smoldering in the aftermath of the torch. Just before dawn he decided to return to his bed. He noticed that the door to Sonny's room was closed.

On the second-to-last day in August he no longer had to imagine that the countryside lay in ruins. It actually did.

He had attended three funerals in a week's time, the first one that of Lester Spurgeon's wife. The eulogies delivered at each of these interments were resonant of a curiously rhetorical emotion; the speakers invariably extolled the virtues of the dead in voices that either quaked with anger or purred with self-justifying haughtiness. Trapper didn't understand what they were talking about.

Several men in the Bay Hamlet area had lost barns and useful outbuildings in the fire-setting debacle in which Seabright Johns had participated. From as far away as Bladed Oak there were reports of other cases of arson, some involving homes, country stores, and even an elementary school built during World War II.

Sonny and Joe Luc watched the newscasts each evening right before the Johnny Carson show but didn't pay much attention to the announcers — even though the Bay Hamlet story had begun to attract a small bit of network coverage. Instead, they played checkers and asked to be crowned and let Trapper bring them Coca Colas and plates of Ritz crackers with cheese.

Then on the second-to-last day of August Sonny got up, ate breakfast with Trapper and Joe Luc, and left in his hot silver automobile for Memphis. "I got to see what's holding up those adoption papers, Trapper. Don't expect me back till evening." He drove off beneath the white battlefield sun, a bloated contrail of dust hanging in the air behind him.

Joe Luc approached Trapper in front of the tool shop. It was unusual to see him outside in the heat — this morning he had no one to sit at the checker table with.

"Mr. Trapper," he said. "I would like to show you what I've done for the people of Bay Hamlet and environs. And for you also, sir."

Before Trapper could answer,

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the Asian youth had walked past him toward the house. Limping, the old man followed. They passed behind the house — into the vegetable garden, through the rows of okra and carrots. They stopped a few feet away from Trapper Catlaw's bedroom window.

"See, please, what I've done."

Trapper looked at the ground beneath his window, where the boy was pointing. There was a rectangular pit about seven-feet deep and nearly as long squeezed between the house and the garden's last row of heat-blasted corn. In the pit's center, three sharpened stakes formed the upthrusting points of a cruel triangle. Amazed, Trapper stared down into the pit.

"What's this?"

"To catch the beast-avenger that murders your friends."

"When'd you have time to dig a hole this big, knothead?"

"Oh, at night, Mr. Trapper. When I cannot sleep, you understand, I come out here and do a little bit."

"I never heard it. Why'd you stick it under my window?"

Joe Luc laughed. "Oh, Mr. Trapper. We know why the pit for the beast-thing must be here." His laughter, which the old man found irritating, continued for several minutes. It was a great joke, Trapper's question.

Then Joe Luc expertly camouflaged the pit, covering it with cornstalks that would support another layer of broad leaves and then sprinkling dirt over the leaves on the cornstalks. In fifteen minutes the pit looked like any other part — unplanted part — of the vegetable garden.

"Don't forget and step here, Mr. Trapper."

The boy went back to the house to watch the morning quiz programs, and Trapper, disconcerted, stood looking at the camouflaged pit as the white blister of a sun rose to its zenith.

Sonny, of course, didn't get back that evening as he had said he would. Neither Trapper nor Joe Luc waited up for him.

Trapper couldn't sleep — not with that pit out there. Shadows shifted on the walls, slid down the Venetian blinds, crawled over his tufted white bedspread. His leg hurt. He wanted to hear Sonny's car pull up through the gravel under the floodlights mounted atop the tool shop.

At last he drowsed, the warm night piquant in his nostrils.

When he awoke, the night smells were tarter, more gassy, evocative of animal musk rather than of chrysanthemums. There was someone standing at the foot of his bed. He cried out and threw the tufted bedspread aside. When the

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thin hand came down on his shoulder, he had one bare foot on the floor.

"Please to not be startled, Mr. Trapper."

It was Joe Luc. Dressed in a white open-collared shirt, brown slacks, and well-polished shoes, he looked like a college student home for the last of his summer holidays in 1948, or '52, or maybe even '58 — before all the unsettling things of the last decade and a half had happened. But even this impression didn't calm Trapper, didn't stay the mysterious droning in his head.

"What you want, Joe Luc? What is it?"

"Shhh. Please, Mr. Trapper. The beast-thing has fallen. For twenty minutes it has been rending itself — eating of its bowels — while impaled on one of our stakes. Shortly it will die."

"How do you know that? What makes you —"

"Shhh."

They listened. Shadows continued to crawl over the room's furniture, but no sounds other than the ineluctable chorusing of the crickets and the droning inside Trapper's head were audible to him. How could the Asian youth have heard anything? What had made him come to the old man's bedroom at this hour?

"There ain't nothing —" Trapper began.

"Shhh." Joe Luc went to the window by the vegetable garden but didn't raise the Venetian blinds. "Please get dressed. We'll go to witness the unraveled destiny of the fallen beast."

Trapper got dressed. He didn't wish to witness the unraveled destiny of the thing that had slaughtered his chickens, felled his cattle, and so completely dismembered Lester Spurgeon's wife that all three morticians in Bladed Oak had agreed that the funeral would have to proceed "closed coffin," an unprecedented and galling admission of defeat. But he got dressed, and Joe Luc led him to the kitchen — although it would have been easier to go through the living room and out the front door.

"I must find a knife. A big knife, Mr. Trapper."

Sonny's stepfather wondered if the boy couldn't just use his teeth for whatever he had in mind, but said nothing. After rummaging about and finding the sort of knife he was looking for, Joe Luc led him through the dark porch and out to the tool shop. There he moved aside some cans of motor oil and picked up a length of blackened rope that lay in the musty debris like some filth-dwelling species of snake. After that, a flashlight.

Trapper waited in the flood of illumination outside the shop. He could not help noticing that

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Sonny's big silver car sat in the driveway not fifteen feet from him. Toads hopped about in the glare, and a horse in the barn whinnied fretfully.

"All right, Mr. Trapper," Joe Luc said. "Ready."

They went around the house to the garden. They looked down into the pit that the boy had dug.

The cornstalks had all fallen into the maw of the trap, and something grotesquely contorted was sprawled half on its side over one of the stakes. The other two stakes had failed to pierce the creature's body but gleamed like new razors. The creature's massive head was twisted toward them. Joe Luc shined the flashlight on it.

In that way Trapper could tell a number of things about the animal. First, it was a black and royal-orange tiger. Second, its great mouth contained a bit of moist cordage from its own intestines. Third, the beast's left eye had none of the terrible fierceness of its right one; in the left socket resided a lump of pus, lightly furred over.

The last thing that Trapper could tell about his metamorphosed stepson was that he was dead.

"Good. Very good," Joe Luc said. "Please help me."

Carefully the Asian youth jumped down into the pit. Then he wrapped the filthy oil-smeared rope around the animal several times and handed the frayed end to Trapper. He climbed back out.

The two of them worked for an hour, two hours, perhaps longer. They extricated the killer beast from the pit. On the edge of the vegetable garden they rested. The sky had turned a bright silver during their labors, a bright reflective silver. Trapper wondered when the dream would end.

After only a few minutes of rest Joe Luc returned to the weretiger and began to skin it with the knife he had brought from the kitchen. The pelt, with the exception of the place where the beast had impaled itself and then ripped viciously at its own flesh, was beautiful. Trapper couldn't watch Joe Luc peeling away that vibrant golden-orange hide.

Without looking back he limped into the house, got into bed, and slept all that hot summer's day. It was the last day of August.

At a little after ten of the following night a messenger came to the front door of Trapper Catlaw's house. He had a registered letter for the old man. Because the first day of September had been unseasonably cool, the messenger was wearing a jacket with a sheepskin collar. When the messenger breathed, Trapper imagined that he saw — or maybe he actually

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saw — puffs of vapor in the chill of the screened-in porch.

"Sign here," the messenger said.

He signed and returned to the living room. Joe Luc sat in the room's single comfortable chair, the one that Sonny had always been partial to. He was wrapped in the beautiful but still rather gamy pelt of the creature they had captured the previous morning. Trapper wished that he wouldn't wear it but didn't know what to say to the boy. As always, the television set was on. The newscaster had just finished saying something about the successful conclusion of the latest series of peace talks in Geneva.

Trapper tuned the announcer's voice out and opened the bulky letter that he had signed for. He unfolded several sheets of official-looking papers that were stapled together in their left-hand corners.

"These are your 'doption papers," he said to Joe Luc. "It says here that I'm supposed to sign them. Not Sonny — me. It don't make a lick of sense. What should I do with them?"

"Sign them, don't sign them. It doesn't matter, Mr. Trapper. I am twenty-one years when it is August."

The room was suddenly like the inside of one of those refrigerated vaults where hunters store the dressed-out carcasses of their prey. Trapper envied the boy his tiger's pelt. He flipped through the adoption papers again. He didn't know what to do. The news, weather, and sports went off.

"Please, Mr. Trapper."

Trapper, bewildered, cold, and fearful, looked at the boy.

"Please change the channel," Joe Luc said. "I wish to see the Shoot-Em-Up-Tony."

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THE ECLIPSE AND I

Most of the knowledge of the Universe around me, in both its animate and inanimate aspects, I gain by hearsay, since my actual life is spent in very much an ivory-tower fashion. The result is that I constantly surprise myself with the extent to which I don't really accept emotionally what I know intellectually.

I was made keenly aware of this for the first time about a dozen years ago when Harry Stubbs (who writes first-class science fiction under the pseudonym of Hal Clement) learned that I had never looked through a telescope. Saddened by this, he took me to Milton Academy, where he taught science, and had me look through a telescope which he had focused on the Moon for my benefit.

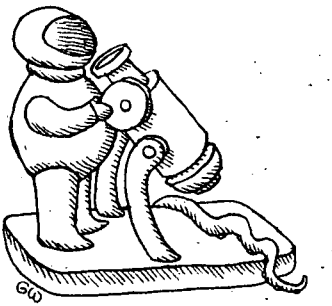
Abandoning my amateur status, I looked through a telescope for the first time in my life, stared at the Moon, then stared at Harry with a wild surmise and said, "Good heavens, there *are* craters on the Moon."

Just the other day, I repeated this triumph of observation —.

On June 30, 1973, I was on the good ship, *Canberra*, a hundred miles or so off the coast of West

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science



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Africa, observing a total eclipse of the Sun — the first total eclipse I had ever seen.

My excitement was extreme, and since I was standing in a forest of cameras, telescopes, and tape recorders, set up by hundreds of amateur astronomers, someone was bound to record my comments, and someone did. That someone then played back the tape to me with great amusement.

Aside from incoherent shouting, two clear statements could be heard. First, I expressed approval of the spectacle as compared with the photographs I had seen. "Yes," I cried, over and over, "that's the way it's supposed to be."

Then I made a clever decution. "The stars are out," I cried, "and that *proves* the stars are there in the daytime."

Well, in addition to that important scientific finding, I enjoyed the eclipse very much; it lived up to all my expectations (except that it was twilight that fell and not night), and, as a result, I am going to talk about eclipses here.

Whenever a cold opaque body is in the vicinity of a source of light, that body casts a shadow. We know that as a matter of common knowledge, but most of us don't stop to think that the shadow is a three-dimensional phenomenon. What we commonly refer to as the shadow is only a cross-section, a two-dimensional darkening of a surface. If, however, the surface is moved toward or away from the light source, it remains in the shadow, which is thus shown to be three-dimensional.

The shape of the shadow depends on the shape of the object casting the shadow, and with respect to astronomical bodies the case is simple. The opaque bodies that most concern us are spheres, and therefore the shadows are conical in shape.

If the opaque body is relatively small compared to the source of illumination, and relatively close to it, the cone converges to a point at not too great a distance from the body. This is the case with the Earth and the Moon, and with the shadows they cast on the side opposite the Sun.

In the case of the Earth, the shadow (which we ourselves enter every evening after Sunset and which we call "night") narrows to a point at a distance of 860,000 miles from Earth's center in the direction, of course, exactly opposite that of the Sun. At a distance of 238,000 miles from the Earth's center (the average distance of the Moon from the Earth) the narrowing shadow has a circular cross-section with a diameter of 5800 miles, as compared to Earth's own diameter of 8000 miles.

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The Moon has a diameter of 2,160 miles, so that when it passes through Earth's shadow, as it sometimes does, it passes through a shadow that is 2.7 times as wide as itself. The entire Moon can be darkened by that shadow, therefore, and can remain in total shadow for as long as an hour and a half.

The Moon, which is as far from the Sun, on the average, as the Earth is, casts a shadow which narrows at the same rate that Earth's does. Since the Moon starts off with a considerably smaller diameter than Earth does, the narrowing brings the Lunar shadow to a point at a correspondingly closer distance to its source. The Moon's shadow comes to a point at a distance of 234,000 miles from the Moon's center.

The Earth's center is, on the average, 238,800 miles from the Moon's center. That portion of the Earth's surface which is directly under the Moon, being 4,000 miles above the Earth's center, is 234.800 miles from the Moon's center.

It follows, then, that if the Moon is directly between the Earth and the Sun, the Moon's shadow comes to a point and ceases nearly one thousand miles *above* Earth's surface. It does *not* reach the Earth.

Still, it seems odd that the point is so close to Earth's surface. Is this really unusual in the sense that it is pure coincidence, or is there some compelling astronomical reason? Let's see.

If the point of the Moon's shadow reached the surface exactly, that would be equivalent to saying that the apparent size of the Moon and the Sun in the sky would be precisely the same. And indeed to the naked eye this seems to be so. The Sun and the Moon have always been taken to be equal in size, if not in brightness, and probably this has seemed natural. If you have two lamps in the sky (in early days, it was taken for granted that the only purpose of the Sun and the Moon were to supply light for the all-important Earth) why shouldn't they be the same size, regardless of brightness? To put it in modern terms, are you surprised that a 100-watt bulb and a 60-watt bulb have the same physical dimensions?

Yet if we measure the apparent diameter of the Sun and the Moon carefully, we find that the sizes are not, indeed, precisely equal. The average apparent diameter of the Sun is 1919 seconds-of-arc, while that for the Moon is 1865 seconds-of-arc. The fact that the Moon, in appearance, is actually a bit smaller than the Sun is equivalent to the statement that the point of the Moon's shadow falls a bit short of the Earth's surface.

So why are the Moon and the Sun nearly equal in apparent size?

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In actual fact, the Sun is larger than the Moon. The Sun's diameter of 864,000 miles is nearly precisely 400 times larger than the Moon's diameter of 2,160 miles. Of course, the apparent size depends not only on the actual size of the two bodies but also on their respective distances. If the Sun were exactly 400 times as distant from us as the Moon, the disparity in diameter would be exactly balanced and both bodies would appear to be the same size.

The average distance of the Moon from the nearest portion of the Earth's surface is 234,800 miles while the average distance of the Sun is 92,900,000. The Sun, in other words, is 395 times as far from us as the Moon is and the difference in real size is nearly balanced in consequence. Because the Sun is not *quite* 400 times as far away as the Moon is, it is a little larger in apparent size than the Moon is and the point of the Moon's shadow ends just a little short of the Earth's surface.

But you know there is nothing that compels either the Sun or the Moon to be exactly the sizes they are, or either to be at exactly the distances they are. The fact that the ratio of sizes nearly matches the ratio of distance is pure coincidence — and, of course, a very lucky coincidence for us.

It is not even an enduring coincidence. The Moon has not always been at its present distance from the Earth, nor with it always remain there. Because of tidal action, it is very slowly receding from the Earth. It has been much closer to Earth in the past (at which time its swollen body appeared markedly larger than the Sun) while it will be much farther from Earth in the future (and then its shrunken body will appear markedly smaller than the Sun).

But let's get back to the Moon's shadow. The narrowing cone of the shadow that I have been talking about is called the "umbra" from a Latin word for "shadow." Surrounding it on all sides, we can picture a diverging cone that starts at the Moon and gets wider and wider as it moves away from the Moon. This is the "penumbra" ("almost shadow").

It is called that because if you imagine yourself located at any point within the penumbra, you will see the Moon cover part of the Sun. That is, you will see a partial eclipse. (The word "eclipse" is from a Greek word meaning "to omit.")

The closer your location within the penumbra to the umbra itself, the greater the fraction of the Sun you will see covered by the Moon. Within the umbra, *all* the Sun is covered; and to a very real extent that is all that really counts. Let me explain why —

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If you are standing on the Earth's surface and the Moon's penumbra, but *not* the umbra, passes over you, then what you see when you look at the Sun, will be the Moon skimming by the Sun, obscuring more and more of it to a maximum that is less than total and then obscuring less and less of it till the Moon moves away altogether. The maximum obscuration can be any amount from barely more than 0 percent to barely less than 100 percent, depending on how close the umbra comes to you.

In most cases of this sort, it seems very unlikely to me that you would know anything had happened, if you hadnt been warned by the newspapers (which were in turn warned by the astronomers) that something was going to happen.

For one thing, no one looks at the Sun for more than a second or so voluntarily, and when one does all one sees is a formless and blinding blaze. Even if the Moon covered up half the Sun and left only a fat crescent of luminosity, you would not see that in the quick second of glance — you would still see only the usual formless dazzle.

I know that in my case this last June 30, it was impossible for me to see, with the bare eye, the details of what was happening to the Sun as long as the tiniest bit of luminous surface remained exposed.

To be sure, I could see the advance of the Moon every time I looked at the Sun (briefly!) through a piece of very darkened and polarized plastic supplied us by the cruise organizers* but I would never have done this if I had not known in advance there would be something to see.

I am convinced then that primitive peoples were not usually frightened by ordinary eclipses, simply because they would not be aware anything was taking place.

Ordinary partial eclipses, that is. There can be exceptional conditions. There might be, for instance, a haze which happens to dim the Sun to the point where it can be looked at without pain, and yet not so thick as to obscure it totally — a kind of natural polarized sheet of plastic in the sky. In that case, the encroaching circle of the Moon would be all too plain and seeing it would be unavoidable. — Such a combination of rarities, however, as a partial eclipse and just the right haze, can only happen once in many centuries.

Even in a clear sky, a partial eclipse, if it is close enough to totality, can produce noticeable effects on the objects about us. If the partial eclipse succeeds in obscuring more than 80 percent of the surface of the Sun, the

**These were chiefly Marci Sigler, her husband Phil Sigler, and her brother Ted Pedas, who did a marvellous job and to whom I am very grateful.*

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quality of Sunlight changes. It begins to fade and take on a clay-like, dead look, which is like nothing else on Earth. After all, there is nothing in the sky of the brightness of a Sun-fraction. The unobscured Sun itself is much brighter and everything else is much dimmer.

The fading light made me uneasy, though I knew what was happening, and from the remarks I heard all about me, even the experienced eclipse buffs were affected. I can well imagine that in such a light, primitive people, who might be unaware that an eclipse was taking place, would nevertheless find themselves feeling that the Sun must be flickering out and would begin trying to look up at it in fear and apprehension.

What's more, if you happened to be in a wooded area where the Sunlight dappled its way between the leaves, you would be accustomed to seeing the Sunlight on the ground as a series of overlapping circles. This is because the tiny spaces between the leaves serve as pinhole cameras so that each circle of light is actually an image of the Sun.

Well, as the Moon cuts off part of the Sun, each one of the overlapping circles of light becomes a little chopped off where the Moon is encroaching. What with the shifts imposed by the movement of the leaves, this would not be casually noticeable at first. By the time, however, that the Moon's shadow had cut off 80 percent or more of the Sun, what was left would be a thinnish crescent and under the tree there would be a myriad dancing crescents in pale and sickly light — and that too would lend an aura of abnormality to the situation.

So primitive people might grow increasingly uneasy even though they did not know what was happening and could not tell by looking at the Sun what was happening. Yet if the light dimmed but did not go out altogether, it seems to me that outright panic would be averted, for the light would start to brighten again soon enough. The partial eclipse might last as much as two hours altogether, but it would only be during the fifteen minutes at the center of the period that the effects would be noticeable.

It is when the eclipse is actually total; when the light dies down to a mere twilight and the stars come out; when one can finally look at the Sun itself and see only a dark circle (surrounded by a dim corona, to be sure) where it used to be; *that* is when panic would strike.

After all, a primitive observer would not know that the dark circle was the Moon obscuring the Sun. It would be only natural to think that the dark circle was the Sun itself, with its fires out, and there's not one of us that wouldn't be afraid to the point of panic if we thought that were so,

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and that we had to face a world of cold and darkness forever. (I can imagine the relief when the first bit of Sun emerged from behind the Moon so that the dark circle seemed to be reigniting and catching fire again.)

I know that there are all kinds of myths about dragons or other monsters swallowing the Sun at the time of eclipse, and we hear tales of primitive people coming out to make noise that will frighten the monster away and force it to let go of the Sun — but I can't help thinking that this is already a case of advanced thought.

To suppose that the Sun is overtaken by something, even if that something is a dragon rather than the Moon, and to suppose that the Sun is intrinsically unharmed and will shine as always once the dragon lets go — is already good astronomy.

No, I think it much more likely that men, at the very beginning, could only think that the Sun's fires were dying, as a campfire might; and that, at the conclusion of the eclipse, the Sun reignited as a smoldering campfire would on the introduction of new fuel.

Since it is only the total eclipse that is of consequence, then, to all but the highly sophisticated, and since the phenomena accompanying the total is widely different and far more spectacular than anything accompanying even the most nearly total of partials, let's stick to the total from now on. That means we must imagine ourselves inside the Moon's umbra.

From any point within the umbra, we see the Moon cover the entire face of the Sun. If we imagine ourselves somewhere on the central axis of the umbra; on the midline of the shadow, extending from its point to the central point of the night-side of the Moon, then that central point of the Moon's visible circle is exactly over the central point of the Sun's visible circle. The Moon laps over the Sun, so to speak, by an equal amount in every direction.

If we move along this midline closer to the Moon, the apparent size of the Moon increases, and it laps over the Sun to a greater extent in every direction. When we actually reach the Moon, that body obscures half the sky and the other half is all shadow — it is night-time on the Moon.

(To be sure, as we move closer and closer to the Moon, we also move closer and closer to the Sun, so that the Sun's apparent size also increases. However, the Sun is so much farther away from us than the Moon is that our approach is a far smaller percentage of the Sun's total distance, and the Sun's increase in apparent size is very small — so small that it can be ignored.)

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If we move along the midline farther and farther away from the Sun, the apparent size of the Moon decreases (again to a far greater extent than the apparent size of the Sun decreases) and it laps over the Sun to a lesser extent in every direction.

If we move along the midline of the shadow to a place sufficiently far from the Moon, we eventually reach the apex of the cone, the point to which it dwindles. Seen from that point, the Moon is exactly the same size as the Sun, the central points of the two bodies coincide, and the Moon fits *exactly* over the Sun.

But at this apex, we are still well above the surface of the Earth if we go by what I said earlier in the article. What if we extend the midline of the cone past the apex, however, and imagine ourselves dropping down that midline to the surface of the Earth. What do we see then?

Once past the apex of the cone of the umbra, the apparent size of the Moon is less than that of the Sun. The Moon does not cover the Sun, and it is the Sun that laps over. Assuming the central points of both circles in the sky coincide, as they would if we remained on the extension of the midline, the Sun laps over an equal amount in every direction.

What we would see in that case is a different kind of partial eclipse; one in which a thin section of the outermost portion of the Solar disc gleams like a luminous ring about the black center that is the obscuring Moon. This is called an "annular eclipse" from the Latin word for "ring."

An annular eclipse of the Sun, being but partial, has none of the phenomena associated with it that a total eclipse has. If, as I have said earlier in this essay, the point of the Moon's shadow is a thousand miles or so above the surface of the Earth, an annular eclipse is all we can ever see when the Moon passes squarely in front of the Sun.

How, then, is it that I have talked about total eclipses? How is it that I myself saw a total eclipse on June 30?

If, indeed, the Earth moved around the Sun in a perfect circle, remaining always 92,900,000 miles from its center; and if, indeed, the Moon moved around the Earth in a perfect circle, remaining always 238,800 miles from its center; then an annular eclipse would indeed be all we would ever see, for the apex of the umra would always skim the Earth a thousand miles above its surface.

But the Earth moves around the Sun in an elliptical orbit, with the Sun at one focus of that ellipse and therefore off-center. This means that the Earth is sometimes closer to the Sun and sometimes farther. The Sun's

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average distance from Earth is, indeed, 92,900,000, but at the point in its orbit when Earth is farthest from the Sun ("aphelion") the distance is 94,500,000 miles. At the opposite point in its orbit, the Earth is closest to the Sun ("perihelion") and the Sun is only 91,500,000 miles away.

This reflects itself in the apparent size of the Sun; not much, to be sure, since the total difference in distance is only 3.2 percent, so that the Sun looks about the same all through the year. Careful measurement, however, shows that although the Sun's average apparent diameter is 1919 seconds-of-arc, it is fully 1950 seconds-of-arc in diameter at perihelion, and only 1888 seconds-of-arc at aphelion.

The situation for the Moon is similar. The Moon moves in an elliptical orbit about the Earth, with the Earth at one focus of the ellipse and therefore off-center. Although the average distance of the Moon from the Earth is 238,800 miles, it passes through a maximum distance ("apogee") of 252,700 miles and a minimum distance ("perigee") of 221,500.

This is a 13 percent difference and reflects itself in a change in the Moon's apparent diameter that is greater than that of the Sun (though still not great enough to impress the casual observer).

Although the apparent diameter of the Moon is, on the average, 1865 seconds-of-arc, it reaches a maximum diameter of 2010 seconds-of-arc and a minimum of 1761 seconds-of-arc.

As the distance of the Sun from the Earth (and therefore from the Moon) changes, the slope by which the cone of the Moon's shadow narrows also changes. The farther the Sun is from the Earth-Moon system, the more gradually the umbra narrows and the farther its point from the Moon — and therefore the closer the point can come to the Earth's surface.

And, of course, when the Moon is closer than average to the Earth, the point of the umbra moves with it and is also closer to the Earth. If the Sun is far enough from the Earth and the Moon is close enough, then the point of the umbra actually reaches the surface of the Earth. Indeed it could penetrate beneath the surface if we imagined the structure of the Earth to be transparent. That is why total eclipses are possible.

If an eclipse should take place just at the time when the Sun was at its farthest and the Moon at its closest to Earth, then the width of the umbra at Earth's surface would be 167 miles. In that case, a little over 21,000 miles of the Earth's surface (half the area of New York State) could be in the Moon's shadow at a particular instant of time.

Still, the *average* position of the point of the umbra is well above the

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Earth's surface, so that it follows that more than half the Solar eclipses seen from Earth's surface would, when seen under the most favorable conditions, be annular rather than total. Too bad!

Let's look at this in another way.

Instead of worrying about the distances of the Moon and Sun, let's just consider their apparent size. The Moon can be anything from 1761 to 2010 seconds-of-arc, and the Sun anything from 1888 to 1950 seconds-of-arc.

The smaller the Moon in appearance and the larger the Sun, the more the Moon misses out in any effort to cover the whole of the Sun. When the Moon is at its smallest and the Sun at its largest, and the central points of both circles in the sky coincide, a 94 second-of-arc width of gleaming Sun shines out beyond the Moon in every direction. The Moon succeeds in covering only 82 percent of the Sun.

On the other hand, when the Moon is at its largest in appearance, and the Sun is at its smallest, not only does the Moon cover the entire Sun but, when they are center to center, the Moon laps over the Sun in every direction by 122 seconds-of-arc.

This overlap isn't terribly important in one way. If the Moon fits exactly over the Sun, then all the phenomena of a total eclipse are visible. The fact that the Moon further overlaps the Sun by a certain amount in no way improves the phenomena. Rather it tends to diminish them by a bit since events immediately adjacent to the Sun's surface are obscured.

Nevertheless, the overlap becomes important if we take time into consideration. After all, the Sun and Moon are not motionless in the sky. Each is moving west-to-east relative to the stars, the Moon at a rate thirteen times that of the Sun, so that it overtakes and passes the Sun.

Relative to the Sun, the Moon moves, west-to-east, 33 seconds-of-arc per minute. Hastening after the Sun, the Moon's eastern edge makes contact with the Sun's western edge for "first contact", and the partial phase of the eclipse begins.

The eastern edge of the Moon encroaches across the face of the Sun at 33 seconds-of-arc per minute and, assuming the Moon is passing squarely in front of the Sun, then in just about an hour, that eastern edge of the Moon reaches the easternmost edge of the Sun to make "second contact," The last light of the Sun shines like a glorious diamond at one end of the dark circle of the Moon. The "diamond-ring effect" fades quickly and the corona comes out. (When I watched the eclipse I held the polarized film before my eyes just a bit too long and I did not see the dying diamond.)

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When the western edge of the Moon reaches the western edge of the Sun, we have "third contact." At this point the Moon has passed by the Sun and the western edge of the Sun peeps out from behind the Moon, forming a diamond-ring effect again. This time the diamond waxes rapidly in brilliance and in a few seconds it is too bright to look at. (I watched this, and those two or three seconds were, for me, the most spectacular and wonderful of the eclipse. An involuntary cry of appreciation came from everyone watching. — How much more heart-felt if we were all primitives who thought the Sun had actually gone out!)

With third contact, the total eclipse is over and the partial eclipse is on again as the Moon slowly leaves the Sun. Finally the western edge of the Moon is at the eastern edge of the Sun and with this "fourth contact," the eclipse is over.

In the case of an annular eclipse, the third contact occurs *before* the second contact. In other words, the western edge of the Sun is revealed before the eastern edge is obscured and there is never true totality.

Where the point of the umbra just reaches the surface of the Earth, the Moon fits exactly over the disc of the Sun and the second and third contacts occur simultaneously. The Sun is no sooner totally covered when the western edge is uncovered and the total eclipse is over.

The further within the umbra that the Earth's surface is, the larger the Moon in comparison with the Sun, and the farther the Moon must travel between second contact and third. When the Moon is at its largest and the Sun is at its smallest, and when second contact is then made, the Moon has just barely covered the eastern edge of the Sun while its western edge still laps 244 seconds-of-arc beyond the western edge of the Sun.

The Moon must then travel for 7.4 minutes (at 33 seconds-of-arc per minute) before its western edge reaches the western edge of the Sun, makes third contact, and brings totality to an end. Seen from any one point on the Earth's surface, then, the maximum length of time that totality can last under the most favorable conditions is 7.4 minutes.

The eclipse that I viewed from the *Canberra* was quite long, and at its best could be viewed for nearly 7 minutes. From the actual spot at sea where the ship was located, totality lasted for nearly 6 minutes. There won't be another as long for over a century.

So all things considered, I'm glad I saw it, even though it did mean I had to travel a total of just over 7,000 miles (I hate travelling) and even though it did mean I had to stay away from my typewriter for 15 days.

I'm so glad I saw it that I plan to continue talking about eclipses next month.

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The third and final story in Mr. Coney's Tales of Finistelle ("The Manya," March 1973; "The Bridge on the Scraw," July 1973) concerning the peace-making efforts of a 21st century scientist in a far-future land.

The Initiation of Akasa

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

The dispute between Aka, captain of balloons, and Jixo, doctor-man to the village of Poli, broke out without warning, although Jixo had been spoiling for a fight for some time. It was unfortunate that Aka triggered it off.

"Let me look," said Jixo, as Aka lay groaning on the ground clutching his ankle, having fallen some twenty feet from a swaying globba balloon. Jixo made to examine the injured member.

"Take you hands off me, Jixo, lest I catch the sickness *klapp*," snarled Aka, twisting away. "God Lackland comes."

Jixo sprang back, his face ocher and contorted with rage. "You shame me, Aka," he hissed. "I was doctor-man before God Lackland came, *yentro*, a long time ago."

"Time passes and men grow wiser," replied the balloon captain airily. "Get back to your spells, old man. I have confidence, in the *manya* of God Lackland only."

The women tittered, gathering around. There was little enough entertainment in the village.

Jixo wheeled around and strode away, muttering, almost colliding with the towering figure of Lackland. "What's going on here?" asked the latter, but he got no reply from the doctor-man, who disappeared among the *dweldas*.

Lackland knelt beside the small green man on the ground. He prodded Aka's ankle. "Does it hurt?" he asked unnecessarily, as the balloon captain screamed.

"As the bite of the forest wolf *kraxa*," replied Aka dramatically.

Lackland scooped up the little man without difficulty and carried him into a *dwelda* hut, laying him on the rough bed. "I do not think

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there is any break there," he said after a brief examination. "It needs rest, that is all. Remain in bed for two days."

"That is what I wanted to hear," observed Aka happily. "Better by far than the mutterings and medicines of Jixo."

Lackland regarded him for a moment. "Jixo is a dangerous man," he said at last. "Be careful, Aka."

Since Lackland had arrived a few seasons ago (*yentro,* as they say in Finistelle, having little notion of time), he had set himself the task of preserving peace in the village and, he hoped, extending this blissful state of affairs to the entire region. He had come to the village of Poli in the Year of Entropy 5629 as a time-traveler with, for technical reasons, no return ticket; and after a few days' unmitigated dismay he had chosen to make himself useful, rather than go mad.

Legend had it that long ago, *yentro,* the region of Finistelle was under a single government which, during a series of uprisings, had lost control over the individual cantons. The eight cantons, at last independent, had fought enthusiastically among themselves for several years. More recently, the villages themselves had begun vying for supremacy within the cantons, although the old canton rivalry still existed. The villages now appointed their own chiefs, which led to further strife on a smaller canvas.

Lackland was trying to put this right, starting at the bottom with the village of Poli in the canton of Gota. He was fighting entropy. He didn't stand a chance.

"I have no fear of Jixo," said Aka scornfully. "He is an old man and half mad, being, I suspect, thirty years old. When I am chief, I will send him to the skies on a blazing globba and laugh when he jumps."

Later in the afternoon Aka's bed was dragged into the open in order that he could supervise the evening flight of the dunnet balloons.

Four of the thirty-foot diameter, hydrogen-filled globba plants were tethered in the middle of the circle of *dweldas;* each balloon was covered with the light, strong net of the giant spider *prungle.* As the balloons rose, each with its attendant green humanoid clinging to the rigging, a further mass of nets unfolded beneath them and were drawn aloft to form the approximate shape of a cube, open at one side only. The four teams of anchormen paid out the ropes, controlling the ascent, and walked steadily on divergent paths to spread the balloons and the net complex over the sky.

"Ease off number four!" shouted Aka, raising himself on

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one elbow and glaring in the direction of the offending anchor team, who were disappearing rapidly behind the *dweldas*. "I smell disaster," he remarked in an aside to Lackland. "I feel it in my bladder. It is not good, that I should be lying here stricken. I am indispensable."

Nevertheless the balloons rose smoothly and before long had reached operating height some six hundred feet up. The wind carried the complex towards the gaunt cliffs known as the Heights of Hurd which represented the boundary between the cantons of Gota and Hurd.

"It happened, *yentro*, that rope three broke and a globba blew into the cliff," remarked Aka.

"What happened then?" asked Lackland, who suffered from acrophobia.

Dongo, chief of the village of Poli, joined the conversation. "The pilot died in some fear," he said. "And there was wailing among the women also, for he was a man much liked by them."

"Although not by others," Aka said significantly. "Many was the wife he bedded while the husband was away." His face was bitter.

"Strange are the ways of justice," observed Dongo heavily.

"The dunnets come," said Aka, before the conversation could become more specific.

They swarmed in from the southwest on a whirring of wings, a dark cloud of plump birds heading for their roosting places in the slumbering crater of Mount Hurd, which rises in the middle of the Hurd plateau.

Aka's expression was faraway as he watched the waiting balloons. "My son Akasa is almost of age," he said. "Now he is anchorman on rope two, but soon he makes his first flight. A man's first flight is an important event and attended by festivities."

"Akasa has strange notions," remarked Dongo. "He has tamed a large erk which follows him around."

"Akasa's ideas are sound," insisted Aka.

The dunnets flocked overhead and the air was filled with screeching and the clattering of wings. They headed straight for the Heights of Hurd, then veered left, near the point where the River Scraw tumbled from the Hurd plateau to the rain forest.

Here they met the sky fishermen.

For a while the balloons were hidden from view by the vast cloud of birds; then the air cleared and the tiny figures of the pilots could be seen hauling on ropes to close the gap in the nets.

"A poor catch," observed Aka. "I expected no more."

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"Look!" said Lackland.

On the lip of the cliffs, silhouetted against the darkening sky, a group of men had appeared.

"The bastard Hurds!" cried Aka.

The balloons were close to the cliff and about a hundred feet below the men of Hurd. The emerald globes were descending jerkily as the anchormen, suddenly aware of the danger to their charges, pulled frantically on the ropes. As the descent became uneven, the rectangle of net twisted and a few dunnets escaped, whirring almost vertically up the cliff face. A balloon, punctured by a well-aimed spear, began to deflate and drop more rapidly, dragging the whole complex with it.

"Unk," said Aka in dismay. "The nets are tearing. It will be many days before we can fish the skies again. Prungle net must be gathered and skilled stitching women put to work." He watched the pilot of the punctured balloon scrambling up the nets, trying to reach a point where the rate of descent was less precipitous. The man lost his grip. "He is dead," remarked Aka, philosophically anticipating the truth by some five seconds.

"A bad business," muttered Lackland as the tattered nets draped themselves untidily among the treetops.

"There will be wailing in the village tonight," said Dongo. In fact the wailing has already started, led by a group of small green females whom Lackland took to be anxious wives or more likely, skilled stitching women.

Walking in the rain forest was a young girl named Joanessa. She trod cautiously and curiously; it was the first time she had been in these parts, and she had heard chilling tales of the local barbarian Gotans, in particular those from Poli, which was nearby. The people of Poli, she had been told, ate human flesh. Being young and headstrong, she was therefore engaged in a pointless exploration. She was from Hurd, and she had descended from the heights early that morning.

Joanessa paused, her way barred by a thick draping of prungle net. It occurred to her that she would be able to observe the surrounding forest more easily from a tree. She caught hold of the mesh and began to climb, intending to traverse to a nearby tall tree. She climbed swiftly and easily, in the way of the hill people.

There are no rain forests in Hurd, and therefore no prungles. It never occurred to Joanessa that the net might have been constructed for a purpose. Taut, it shivered and hummed as she climbed.

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A large, shapeless bulk shifted in a tree, and an eyestalk extended like a telescope.

She paused as a small animal scuttled beneath. It had large ears and bright eyes, and it looked up at her for an instant before darting off into the undergrowth with a flick of a black bushy tail. She heard faint distant sounds, and a man laughing. She thought, with mild surprise, that Gotans laugh just like anyone else. She had expected cannibals to be humorless folk.

Behind her the prungle stirred, the vague shape unfolded itself, eyes on erect stalks, grasping the net delicately in chitinous claws. The creature glided from concealment, swaying, a giant globular body with a smaller head, all covered with coarse red hairs.

Joanessa felt the net tremble, and a sudden horror tingled in her chest, so that at first she could not look round. When she did, she tried to scream and began to clamber down, fumbling, clumsy and desperate.

Her hands lost their grip and she fell backwards. Her right foot slipped through the mesh. She swung upside down, unable to free herself.

The prungle's eyes jutted forward attentively as it swayed towards her with a swift though jerky motion, grasping for the net, pausing for consolidation, swinging forward again. It uttered a chirping sound, almost a screech. This sound was not vocal; it was caused by powerful mandibles grating in anticipation.

Joanessa could see this as the prungle moved closer. It seemed to be at least three times her size.

She had stopped screaming, and her frantic kicking had become weaker as she tired. Almost delicately, the prungle took hold of her left leg and edged itself closer until it straddled the lower part of her body, swaying, mandibles chirping so close that she was deafened. Little drops of moisture spotted her bare chest, numbing where they spread. She closed her eyes, whimpering.

The net trembled violently, and the coarse hair of the creature's abdomen rasped across her legs. A sharp pain in her ankle caused her to open her eyes. Incredibly, the prungle seemed to have temporarily lost interest in her; it had averted its head and was shifting position, clawed feet seeking fresh holds on the net as it turned away.

The prungle's hind legs still straddled her, and the pointed tip of the abdomen now hung near her face. Beyond, further along the sweep of the net, she saw a youth with a spear. He clung to the strands with one hand while he jabbed fiercely at the prungle with his weapon. The creature moved

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away from her. She grasped the net and pulled herself upright, kicking her ankle free. She dropped to the ground in a heap, stood, and began to move quietly away.

"Atta, atta!" The youth stood before her, sweating and waving his bloody spear proudly. The prungle lay slain, twitching reflexively.

Joanessa eyed her savior nervously. He had a lean and hungry look. Behind him stood a giant bird with a cruel beak; it looked accustomed to tearing flesh.

"I am Akasa, son of Aka!" cried the youth. "Adept at killing the vile prungle!"

It appeared that he wished to make conversation. Joanessa moistened her lips; talk would delay the inevitable. "Who is Aka?" she asked.

He flung his arm dramatically upwards. "Behold! My father rides the skies!"

She squinted up at the distant balloon. "It seems he looks this way."

"Unk." Akasa grunted in alarm and drew her under a concealing tree. "My father would not wish me to talk to a bastard Hurd. He is a man of pride, being captain of the balloons."

"Why do you think I am from Hurd?"

He looked at her scornfully. "Your breasts are uncovered in a manner disgusting to the eyes. The women of Hurd do not know how to dress. This I have been told. It is true." He averted his eyes.

"At least I do not eat human flesh like the abominable Gotans," retorted Joanessa.

"It is the bastard Hurds who eat human flesh," Akasa contradicted her. "They say the flavor is not unlike forest pig."

"Who says?"

"Certain wise men in our village."

"And how do they know, if they have not tasted it themselves?" There was triumph in Joanessa's voice.

Akasa was ready for that one. "It seems that Hurd spies were captured *yentro*, long ago. They confessed before they were burned."

"Burned? Cooked, you mean?"

"They were sent to the skies on blazing globbas," explained Akasa patiently. "In Poli, that is the way. *Sitwa.*"

Joanessa was silent for a while. "Is that why you saved me from the prungle," she asked at last. "So that I may be executed in the way of your people?"

This gave Akasa pause for thought, too. "You do not look like a spy," he said slowly.

Following this admission, the conversation took a more amicable turn and the two youngsters strolled through the forest, ex-

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changing views. The erk paced behind.

Later Akasa drew Joanessa behind a tree as a large white man strode by, staring at the ground. "That is God Lackland," he whispered.

"I have heard tell of God Lackland. He came from the skies, in a flaming chariot, did he not?"

"Scattering gifts," agreed Akasa. "Which he now seeks in the forest. He is wise and good, and has taught us many things."

"Then why are we hiding from him?"

"It is not right that I should be seen talking to you."

"So why do we talk?"

"You ask too many questions, Hurd girl. And I am hungry," added Akasa inconsequentially. "Let me show you what Belingo can do." He called the bird and uttered a few incomprehensible instructions. The erk took off, flapping heavily into the sky. "I am training him to help the sky fishermen by driving the dunnets into the nets," explained Akasa. "But so far with little success, as he is a hungry bird and not intelligent."

They waited for a moment, then Belingo was back, a fat dunnet gripped in his curved talons. The erk landed and quickly bit the head off its prey. "Stop that!" cried Akasa, catching Belingo a blow on the side of the head with his spear. "Such is not the way, *sitwana*. Bring, but do not eat."

The erk regarded the youth inscrutably for an instant, then took a giant stride towards Joanessa, who backed away nervously. Then, gently, Belingo laid the dunnet at her feet.

There was a moment's silence. Joanessa recovered sufficiently to pat the erk on the head.

"It seems he is learning," muttered Akasa with suppressed annoyance.

"It seems he likes me."

"He is a treacherous bird."

Akasa swung away and strode off into the forest followed, after a moment, by Joanessa and the erk.

There was a war council in the village of Poli.

Aka, on his feet again, spoke. "It seems I am risking the lives of my men for nothing. Our way of life is to reap dunnets from the skies, and our catch is now threatened by the bastard Hurds. Yet chief Dongo will not fight back, and God Lackland urges peace, as is his way. Must we starve? Must my men die?"

"If we attempted to scale the Heights of Hurd, we would be thrown back," replied Dongo. "If we must fight, let us choose a weak adversary."

Aka sighed in exasperation. "My chief has missed the point, as

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usual. It is the bowmen of Hurd who threaten us. If we cannot catch dunnets because they keep shooting us down, then how will we live? Answer me that, Dongo."

Dongo glanced slyly at Lackland. "Our god has a *manya,*" he said. "It can burn a man at a distance, having the striking power of *kraxa-kraxa.* Next time the Hurds appear on the heights, I suggest that God Lackland burn them down as they stand, like wheat."

"*Sitwana,*" replied Lackland firmly. "Such is not the way." He was also reluctant to admit that, somehow, he appeared to have mislaid his laser pistol.

Aka agreed. "It is possible that God Lackland, although infallible, might miss. I would not care to be riding the balloon which was struck down by his mighty *kraxa-kraxa.* No. We must send a raiding party up the heights. We will drive them back, and they will think twice before venturing so close to the Gotan borders again."

It had been several months since the last military action, and so it was not surprising that Aka's suggestion drew a roar of approval from the young warriors. Spears rattled like excited Geiger counters. "Atta, atta!" they shouted.

"We fight," said Jixo the doctor-man, edging away.

"*Sitwa,*" said Dongo resignedly.

The following morning, as the rising sun cast menacing shadows on the jagged face of the heights, the task force was seen to be assembling. Dongo emerged from his *dwelda* rubbing sleep from his eyes and broke into a ritual chant. The chorus was taken up, and the small army departed, yelling, in the direction of the Heights of Hurd. Lackland brought up the rear, vainly urging peace. Jixo the doctor-man, despite his support for the mission, was nowhere to be seen.

At the fringe of the forest a short grassy slope rose to the foot of the heights. Away to the west the Falls of Hurd thundered, amplified by the cliffs. Ahead was a fault in the seven hundred-foot rock face, a deep fissure strewn with boulders, ascending at an angle of some sixty degrees. This was their route.

"And no doubt it is well guarded," remarked Dongo as they reached the first of the boulders. "But we are not afraid. We have with us God Lackland."

The warriors had paused. At this reassurance they uttered a yell of enthusiasm.

"Maybe if we kept quiet, we might take their guards by surprise," ventured Lackland. The suggestion was accepted.

They climbed. It was a grueling ascent; the larger boulders presented serious obstacles, while the

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smaller ones rolled away under their feet, causing minor landslides. Lackland had chosen to bring up the rear as being the least hazardous position, but by the time they were halfway up the cleft he was not so sure. It took about an hour to reach the top, by which time his shins were a landscape of cuts and bruises.

They emerged from a deep gulley onto the plateau of Hurd. Coarse grass and a few stunted trees rose gently to the dark shape of Mount Hurd in the distance. A wisp of smoke trailed from the summit. There was no sign of the enemy.

"The unseen Hurd is the worst," muttered Dongo nervously, glancing around.

The army, numbering thirty odd, milled around uncertainly, aware of a sensation of anticlimax. They had come to drive the Hurds back to their villages, but there were no Hurds to drive. Dongo seemed to have run out of ideas.

"Maybe we ought to go back," suggested Lackland.

"Never!" cried Dongo. "Such a course would imply retreat." He stared belligerently at the inoffensive grassland, gripping his spear, making a few practice jabs. "West!" he shouted suddenly. "We head west, towards the Falls of Hurd. There we will find the enemy!"

Inspired, the group broke into a trot along the clifftop, Lackland with his long strides easily keeping pace with the little green warriors. The rain forest was dizzyingly far below and he edged inland; heights had a peculiar effect on him, and it only requires an instant's temporary insanity to jump.

It was while pondering on this that he happened to glance behind. A horde of Hurds had risen from concealment and was pursuing them, grimly and silently.

"Dongo!" he called.

The chief looked round and saw the enemy. "Unk," he muttered, gathering speed.

"Shouldn't we fight our way back to the cleft?"

"There are too many," panted Dongo. "We must run."

"Where are we running to?" asked Lackland, striding along easily while Dongo scampered alongside.

"That I do not know," admitted the chief. "Although I fear the worst, for the River Scraw is ahead. It abounds with the dreadful fangsnapper. It occurs to me, God Lackland, that you will have to use your mighty *manya* on the Hurds, burning them down as they run with a terrible stench. Do not allow this to distress you, for they are bastards to a man."

"I didn't bring my laser," said Lackland evasively.

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"Unk. We are dead."

"Your men have their weapons."

"What use are mere arrows against the multitude who pursue us? I tell you this, God Lackland," admitted Dongo with unaccustomed honesty, "if I had known you had not brought your *manya,* I would not have come."

Lackland, confident of his own ability to outpace the enemy, suddenly felt sorry for the little chief. Death is death, whatever the color and size of the recipient. Ahead, he could hear the roar of the River Scraw where it tumbled over the lip of the Heights of Hurd. "We shall have to make a stand here," he said.

They veered left and distributed themselves among a group of boulders at the water's edge. They faced the enemy, arrows nocked. They were on a narrow peninsula of land; behind them, the Heights of Hurd dropped seven hundred feet to the rain forest. To their left, the River Scraw sped noisily by and, in an awesome arc, dropped likewise. Ahead, the Hurds approached rapidly, yelling and brandishing spears.

Lackland wondered how he had got himself into this. Even his long legs were of little use now; the Poli task force was completely cut off. They could not retreat; they would have to fight. He glanced at the river, wondering if he might force his way upstream against the current, under cover of the bank. A huge green claw emerged from the rushing water, snapping at his shadow. On balance, he decided that he stood a better chance against the Hurds.

The enemy's advance had slowed; they slipped among the trees fifty yards away and took up position for a siege. Arrows clattered among the boulders. Lackland ducked as one sang over his head like a hornet; he turned to see it winging away over the edge of the cliff, dropping as it lost momentum, dropping towards the forest far below...He clutched the rock before him, dizzy.

Dongo crept beside him. "We are holding them."

"For how long?"

Fear had lent the chief a certain dignified bravado. "Until the last arrow is gone, and the last spear broken," he intoned. "We will fight them through the rocks, we will fight them to the very edge of the cliffs, until the last man is dead. We will never surrender."

Lackland drew little comfort from this heroic picture. "Perhaps we should consider alternatives," he ventured.

"There is no alternative. My people would rather die than submit to the bastard Hurds. Besides, the Hurds have a way with

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their prisoners, which concerns the stomach of their volcano." He gestured towards Mount Hurd, from which the trail of smoke ascended suggestively.

Lackland was alarmed to observe signs of retreat among the Poli warriors, who were creeping back through the rocks towards the cliff edge. "Our arrows are gone," cried one. "We are dead."

Lackland found that he was suddenly alone. The men of Poli clustered at the edge of the cliff, weaponless, presumably savoring their last seconds. The Hurds had left the trees and were advancing silently. Lackland looked desperately from one group to the other.

The men of Poli began to jump, one by one, then in twos and threes, yelling. "Come, God Lackland!" Dongo shouted.

The Hurds approached, still silent, until they stopped before him and he could back away no further. They held spears at the ready, arrows pointed at his chest. There must have been a hundred of them. Their leader spoke.

"So you are the God Lackland of whom we have heard." He smiled unpleasantly. "You do not resemble a God to me, having no visible *manya* to protect you. It seems you are like us, merely being larger and whiter. And like us, you can be killed.

It was a short speech and to the point in more ways than one, being concluded by a thrust from a spear which sent Lackland tumbling over the seven-hundred foot drop.

"Spread your wings, God!" shouted the Hurd leader, among appreciative mirth from his followers.

"It is indeed fortunate for you that I am a man of resource, God Lackland," observed Aka smugly. "Few others, on seeing the battle on the heights, would have had the wit to send the balloons aloft. It is not the first time I have caught you in my nets." He was referring to the occasion long ago, *yentro,* when Lackland had materialized in the sky and been saved from an impacted fate by the presence of the evening skyfishing team.

"I thank you, Aka," said Lackland from his bed. He was bruised from his fall into the net, but not so painfully as Dongo and the various other members of the army on whom he had fallen. "And now I will sleep."

The little man's face took on an expression of dismay. "But you come to watch my son Akasa?"

"Unk," said Lackland, who had entirely forgotten the initiation ceremony. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. Aka departed to make the final arrangements, and Lackland went

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into Dongo's *dwelda*. "How are you feeling, chief?" he asked.

Dongo groaned graphically. "You injured me cruelly, God Lackland, being more weighty than the giant *heff*, which inhabits the northern grasslands. Nevertheless," he smiled bravely, "it is good to be alive..." He began to scowl again. "What I wish to know is, why were the bastard Hurds ready for us? They hid, then rose from the ground cutting off our retreat. How did they know we were coming? Do we have a wretched spy in the village?"

"Quite possibly."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"No matter, we will seek him out in due course. But now, today is a day of feasting. We celebrate our great escape of yesterday, and also the initiation of Akasa, son of my good friend Aka. Although Akasa is a youth of strange ideas, and given to wandering in the forest of late. Sometimes I suspect he hunts the low grunter, like the malodorous men of Breda."

Akasa's emerald complexion had taken on a yellowish tinge as he stood beside the huge balloon, waiting for the anchormen to attach the rope to the satisfaction of his father. Belingo, the giant bird of prey, watched with a cynical eye. Aka, nervous himself, tried a joke.

"And if you fall, my son, I'm sure your pet will catch you before you merge with the moist soil of the forest floor."

Akasa was silent. Sensing that a faux pas had been committed, Aka hurried on: "Every precaution has been taken. The balloon will not approach the heights; the anchormen will walk southwards. So you will have nothing to fear from the bastard Hurds. You will hover over the village, and we will all be watching you. Then, we will feast. Great will be the merrymaking."

"I shall look forward to it," said Akasa coldly.

"Better by far is the flying than the loafing about in the forest. Soon you will replace me as captain of the balloons, this being a hereditary post. I myself, I trust, will become chief." But Aka said this last sentence to himself.

The prungle net had been draped carefully over the globba and secured around the base with a purse-string suture. The rope was attached. Akasa thrust his arms through the net near the bottom. Aka uttered a word of command. The balloon rose from the ground as the anchormen paid out the rope. Belingo winged heavily into the air, circling the globba. The anchormen, still paying out rope, began to walk slowly away from the village, in a southerly direction.

"Let us prepare the feast!" cried Dongo enthusiastically.

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This they did, laying roast dunnets, fruit and vegetables on long tables in the center of the circle of *dweldas*. Wine and beer in young globba skins lay on other tables wobbling like breasts. From time to time glances were cast upwards, where Akasa hung from his balloon three hundred feet above the village, apparently still conscious, to judge from the way his legs twitched occasionally.

Dongo pointed to the clifftop with a derisive chuckle. "See the men of Hurd," he said. "Watching, out of range, and doubtless cursing foully. In two days we have outwitted them twice."

His delight was interrupted by a shout from Aka. "The rope! Look at the rope!"

The rope which tethered the balloon of Akasa, son of Aka, was burning. Wisps of smoke trailed away. The rope parted as they watched and came snaking back to earth. The balloon rose gently, heading north on the breeze, accompanied by the circling erk.

"He will soon be in range!" cried Aka. "They will shoot him down! Do something, God Lackland!"

"They will not shoot him down yet," said Dongo bitterly. "That way, he would fall gently into the forest. They will wait until he is over their territory before they fire. Then they will take him prisoner. The bastard Hurds have much sport with their executions."

The balloon rose, drifting towards the Heights of Hurd.

"Why doesn't he puncture the balloon with his knife?" asked Lackland.

"He has no knife. Knives are not permitted on initiation flights, lest the pilot give way to temptation before his time is up."

Dongo shouted to his warriors. "Gather your spears, men! We will storm the Heights of Hurd and avenge the son of Aka. Or even rescue him," he added as an afterthought, "for the Hurd execution is a lengthy and tedious procedure."

Lackland found himself running through the forest, accompanied by a horde of small, vociferous green men. From time to time he glanced at the sky. The balloon was now higher than the cliffs, and about two hundred yards from the edge where the group of Hurds were waiting.

"My son is dead," muttered Aka as he ran.

"Look at that!" shouted Lackland. "He's coming down!"

The group stopped abruptly, staring at the sky. The balloon, with Akasa swinging below, was falling towards them. They could make out the slender needle of an arrow protruding from the flesh of the globba. Faint howls of

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frustration reached them from the clifftop.

"They shot too soon," yelled Aka in delight. "The bastard Hurds are always impetuous!"

They ran to the foot of the cliff, eyes on the balloon. It hit the rock wall once, gently, bounced slowly away, and dropped to the grass. Akasa disentangled himself and walked stiffly towards them, pausing only to be violently sick.

The yells from the clifftop had intensified; an overhang hid the Hurds from Lackland's view as he peered upwards. Suddenly he shouted: "Look out!"

Two figures fell past the cliff face to land with a dead impact twenty feet from where they stood. The warriors of Poli gathered round the bodies.

"It is Jixo," said Dongo.

He regarded the body of the doctor-man sadly. "He was a true man of Poli. It must have been he who saved Akasa, by shooting the balloon before it reached the cliff. He paid for his heroism with his life. *Sitwa.*" There was an arrow buried deep in Jixo's stomach.

Aka was examining the other body. "See," he said. "God Lackland, this shows the type of people the Hurds are. They make warriors even of children."

It was a young girl, her body twisted. Strapped to her back was an empty quiver. Lackland bent close, saw the dreadful burn on her shoulder.

Further away, a gleam in the grass caught his eye. He walked across and retrieved the laser pistol. He glanced at the charred end of the rope where it trailed away from the deflated balloon.

He looked at Akasa. The youth met Lackland's eyes without expression, then turned towards his father. "Let us go," he said heavily. "I would like to drink much wine, for I am now of age."

They moved back into the forest. Lackland turned to see Belingo standing by the balloon. As he watched, the huge bird strode over to the dead girl and, spreading his wings, lowered himself over her, uttering a low, plaintive sound.

"Strange," said Lackland thoughtfully, in English.

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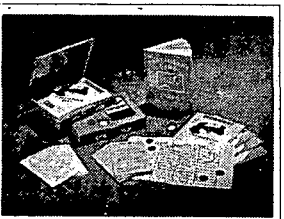

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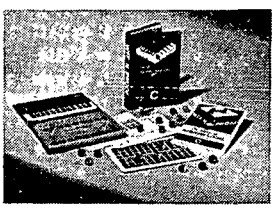

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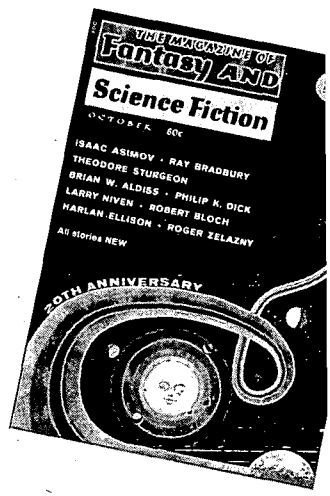

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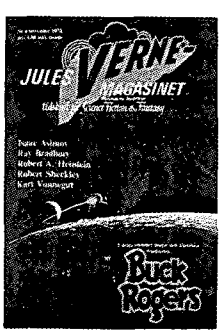

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